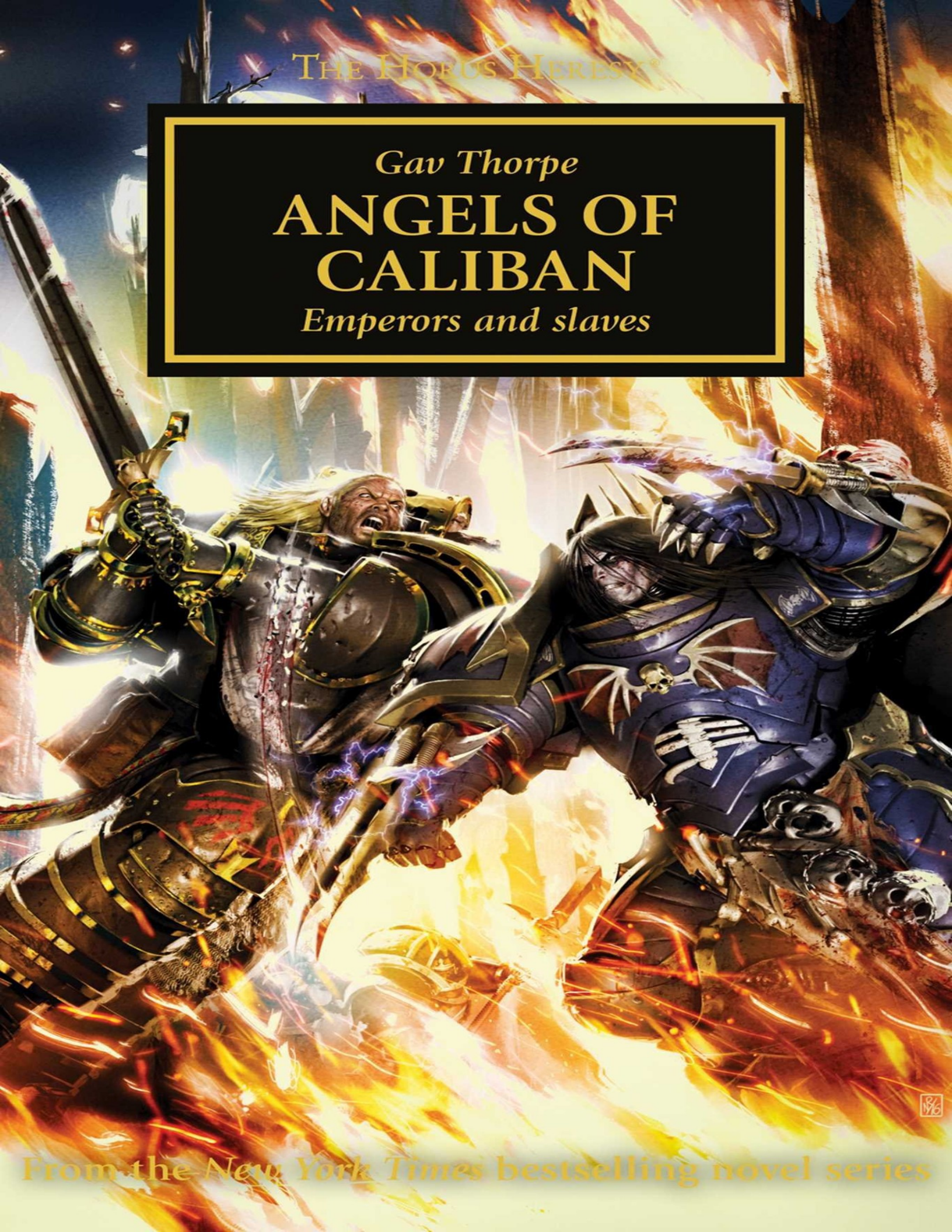
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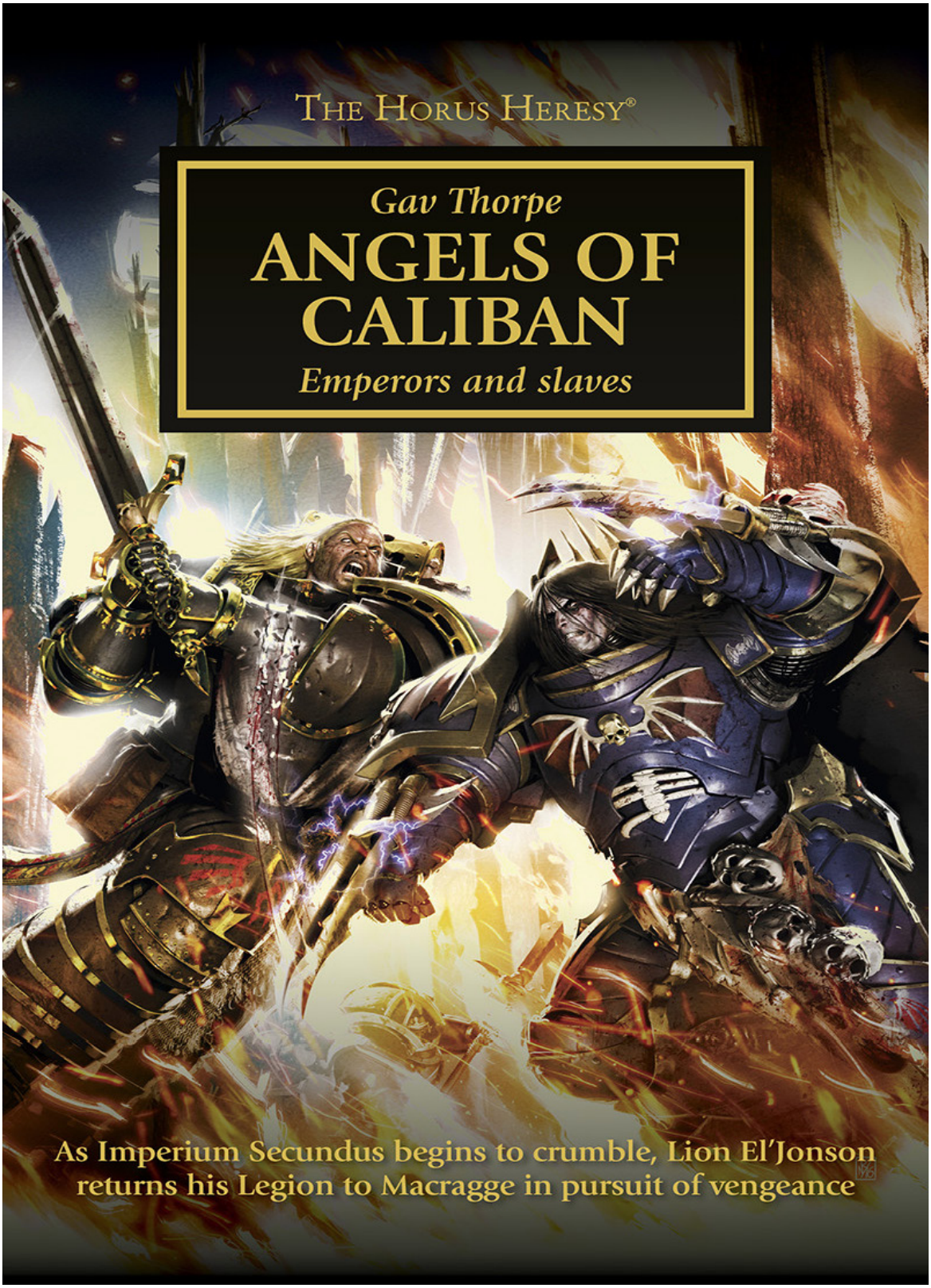
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Gav Thorpe

ANGELS OF CALIBAN

Emperors and slaves

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

Caliban's Saviours

Luther, Grand Master of the Order
Lord Cypher, Guardian of the Order's traditions

Merir Astelan, Master of the First Chapter
Galedan, Chapter Master, Marshal of the Watch

Zahariel, Librarian, Master of the Mystai
Vassago
Asradael
Tanderion
Cartheus
Athadrael

Vael, Lieutenant-commander
Vastobal, Captain
Adarthian, Training master

Bethalin Tylain, Marchesa-colonel, Imperial Army auxilia
Saulus Maegon, Mistress of the Angelicasta

Belath, Chapter Master
Asmodeus, Librarian
Griffayn, 'The Spear-Cast', sergeant-at-arms
Tagrain, Deck-captain, transport division
Haster, Deck-lieutenant

Tukon, Chapter Master, now captive beneath Aldurukh
Melian, Captain, now captive beneath Aldurukh

Distant Macragge, and Imperium Secundus

Sanguinius, The Imperator Regis, beloved primarch of the Blood Angels

Roboute Guilliman, Lord Warden, noble primarch of the Ultramarines
Lion El'Jonson, Lord Protector, vengeful primarch , of the Dark Angels

Valentus Dolor, Tetrarch of Ultramar (Occluda)
Titus Prayto, Master of the Presiding Centuria, XIII Legion Librarius
Myrdun, Librarian of the First Legion

Drakus Gorod, Fief commander of the Invictus bodyguard
Azkaellon, Commander of the Sanguinary Guard
Faffnr Bludbroder, Watch-pack master of the Space Wolves

Vodun Badorum, Captain of the Praecental Guard, household division
Tarasha Euten, Chamberlain Principal to Lord Guilliman

Stenius, Legionary captain, and master of the *Invincible Reason*
Theralyn Fiana, Chief Navigator of the *Invincible Reason*, House Ne'iocene

Holguin, 'Deathbringer', voted lieutenant of the Deathwing
Morphael
Athoris
Carolingus
Nemeres

Farith Redloss, 'Dreadbringer', voted lieutenant of the Dreadwing
Danaes, Voted successor, Dreadwing
Halswain
Xavis, Paladin of the 20th Order
Barzareon, Paladin of the 31st Order

Neraellin, Lieutenant, commander of the *Colgrevance*
Hexagia, Aide-de-militant to Neraellin

Sacatus Demor, Sergeant of the Ultramarines
Thoran, Sergeant of the Dark Angels

Casobourn
Asamund
Faretael
Dolmun

Daevios, Master of Ordnance, XIII Legion
Hastenral, Munitions provost
Parestor, Whirlwind artillery commander
Metrital
Sardeon

Konrad Curze, The Night Haunter, renegade primarch of the Night Lords

Champions of the Great Crusade

Horus Lupercal, Primarch of the Luna Wolves
Ezekyle Abaddon, First Captain, Mournival
Tarik Torgaddon, Mournival
Litus, Mournival
Janipur, Mournival
Garviel Loken, Shield-lieutenant

Calas Typhon, First Captain of the Death Guard, master of the Grave Wardens
Hadrabulus Vioss, Captain of the Grave Wardens
Hurklan, Sergeant

Israfael, Chief Librarian of the Dark Angels

Erebus, First Chaplain of the Word Bearers

DeBlessent, Lieutenant, Ayliet Phalanx auxilia, Imperial Army

Regulus, Envoy of the Martian Mechanicum

‘If a group of people feels that it has been humiliated and that its honour has been trampled underfoot, it will want to express its identity, and this expression of an identity will take different shapes and forms.’

– Abdul-qarim Sereni, *Remembrances of the Peaceful Compliance of Caliban*

‘There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.’

– attrib. the Emperor, to the Six Hosts at embarkation upon the Expeditionary Fields

PROLOGUE

Zaramund, 970.M30

The two gigantic warships lay abreast of each other in orbit over the world, dwarfing all of the other nearby cruisers, frigates and destroyers like alpha bulls in a herd of metal-and-ferrocrete beasts. Beneath them dark plumes stained the violet clouds of Zaramund, spilled from entire cities on fire. Millions of tonnes of orbital wreckage paid further testament to the fury of the Zaramundian rebellion and the subsequent response by the Emperor's Legiones Astartes.

Two immense starships, each the pride of their respective fleet, each capable of laying waste to a world.

The *Vengeful Spirit*. The *Terminus Est.*

Names that resounded across the fledgling Imperium of Mankind alongside the *Macragge's Honour*, the *Invincible Reason*, the *Conqueror* and a dozen others, many of them flagships that had led the fleets of the Emperor into the darkness and reclaimed the galaxy for humanity.

Aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, the commander of the *Terminus Est* stood in the massive avenue hall approaching the strategium, surrounded by a throng of attendees both human and transhuman. Some were clad in the white armour of Calas Typhon's own XIV Legion. Others bore the equally pale livery of their Luna Wolves hosts.

Huddled in groups around the giant warriors they attended was a sea of serfs, helots, servitors, strategos, orderlies, squires and many other titles beside, dependent upon role and Legion.

A splash of red robes to the left marked the presence of the highest-ranking Mechanicum officials present in the fleet. Surrounded by a gaggle of flesh-spare adepts stood Regulus – less a man, more a mechanical skeleton clad in slivers of flesh that appeared almost decorative upon his gold and steel form. Two gigantic vat-bred servitors carried between them a huge cog wrought of dull white material, engraved with sapphire-like runes. Typhon had no idea what the icon was for, and cared less. The ways of the Mechanicum were best not explored in detail.

A patch of gold just behind belonged to the Ayliet Phalanx, the Imperial Army auxilia regiment currently supporting the Luna Wolves. They were obscured from

view as three immense warriors in the plate of the Luna Wolves moved between the auxilia commanders and Typhon.

Calas Typhon, a lieutenant commander in the First Great Company of the Death Guard, veteran of decades of bloody war, felt a shudder of excitement and trepidation as he looked ahead to the short processional that would take them into the grand hall of the primarch.

A twenty-metre colonnade of black stone decorated with a fretwork of silver wire flanked the great portal of the strategium. More of the Phalanxis lined the way, their weapons held in salute across their chests, company banners moving gently in the breeze of the artificial climate inside the battle-barge. In contrast to the bulky powered war-plate of the Space Marines, the Phalanxis wore long coats of golden mesh-scale, hemmed with thick banks of scarlet at wrist and ankle, broad belts studded with ceramite cinched around their waists. They carried *jezzailli*, long-barrelled lasguns more like spears with metre-long leaf-shaped bayonets affixed.

Amongst them were sergeants with bared power swords and presented volkite serpentae, here and there an officer with a high plume on his helm. Their weapons doubled as badges of office, metre-long rods that contained powerful shockfield generators that could pierce the hull of a tank or turn an unarmoured man to bloody slush with a touch. The glittering scale of majors and captains and lieutenants – and even one full war marshal with an ebon cloak held by a ruby starburst clasp – was covered by cuirasses of laminated black adorned with a white strike of lightning between moulded pectorals.

The flared helms of all had silver visors that covered their eyes, and their visible features were set with grim determination, but Typhon could see quivering lips and the smallest droplets of tears as the assembled veterans struggled to maintain their composure amidst such grand spectacle.

It was typical of Horus' touch, his recognition of the efforts of others. Of all the grand and noble warriors who had fought for Zaramund he had chosen a hundred heroes from the unaugmented human regiment to act as honour guard to his act of commemoration.

Typhon glanced at his second-in-command, Hadrabulus Vioss, and smiled.

'Remind me to convey congratulations to the Luna Wolves commander for a brief campaign perfectly executed. We are, of course, honoured to attend his ceremony of recompliance.'

'Recompliance?' Vioss raised an eyebrow. His handsome features took on a roguish look as he smiled back. 'Have you just invented a new type of campaign?'

'What else would you call it?' Typhon asked. He kept his eye moving across the quiet, organised crowds that went about their duties with a cold, deliberate air.

‘Zaramund broke from compliance. Now it is compliant again. Recompliance.’

Vioss’ humour dissipated. ‘Who would have thought Zaramund would turn? One of the oldest reclaimed systems, essential to the first expeditions. How could the authorities of such an important world allow it to fall into such dissent? It was good that the primarch responded so swiftly and decisively.’

There was admiration in his voice. Admiration that Typhon shared. Horus had drawn together a considerable strike force in an astoundingly short time, and wielded it with brutal but effective command.

‘Essential,’ replied Typhon. ‘The disruption to warships and supplies bound to the expedition fleets would have been grave enough for such a reaction. The threat to Terra if a conduit system, a major shipyard at that, was ever to turn back from service to the Emperor…’

Typhon considered what might have occurred had Horus not responded so dramatically to the interruption of his supply ships. Several dozen starships of different classes all poised within an easy warp jump of the Throneworld. They both fell silent at the thought, though for different reasons. A seed of an idea, barely formed, settled in the back of Typhon’s thoughts.

‘Serious mischief, rightly curtailed,’ Vioss said eventually, breaking Typhon’s nascent chain of thought. ‘A stroke of luck that the Luna Wolves returned when they did.’

‘No luck was involved, I’m sure. The primarch is canny like that. Some might see a few missing transports as just one of those irritating things that happens on campaign. A primarch, a commander like him, knows that nothing short of alien attack or rebellion would keep those ships from his fleet.’

Vioss accepted this without comment and they waited in silence for a few minutes until a lone figure appeared at the end of the colonnade. He was silhouetted in the light from the strategium, a giant compared to the soldiers of the Phalanxis, clad in Terminator armour even bigger than the war-plate of Typhon and his companion.

The figure approached purposefully and what little chatter there had been amongst the waiting crowd fell to silence. The Phalanxis presented their arms as the warrior advanced. The light of the colonnade revealed an impassive face, unyielding and weathered. His head was shaven but for a topknot, his cheeks and chin clean of all hair.

Ezekyle Abaddon, First Captain of the Luna Wolves, almost as feted as his primarch. He stopped five metres away. When he spoke, the deep growl was projected far into the avenue hall by the address systems of the *Vengeful Spirit*.

‘You may attend the commander now.’

With that simple statement, Abaddon turned and strode back towards his master. The delegates looked at each other, knowing that no formal order of

entrance had been agreed or decreed but none wishing to rush forward in an undignified scrum.

A quintet of warriors broke from the throng to the left, stirring a murmur of conversation. Four were Space Marines, with the build of such, but the fifth, though wearing armour similar to the Legiones Astartes, was clearly shorter and slighter. They were clad in black battleplate, a winged sword symbol upon their shoulders. What was confusing to most was that the lesser of the warriors walked slightly ahead, the Space Marines clearly deferential to him a pace behind.

'The Dark Angels,' whispered Vioss.

He may have been overheard or it may have been coincidence, but a second later the Dark Angels' leader turned in his course, cutting across the colonnade to approach Typhon and his second. His thick, dark hair was cropped almost to the scalp, his lower face covered by a carefully shaped beard.

'Lord Luther,' said the Death Guard commander, nodding in respect to the leader of the First's contingent, and then to each of the Dark Angels. 'Brothers of noble Caliban.'

One of them uttered a surly grunt at this remark, but his commander cut off any comment that was going to follow.

'Captain Typhon, an honour to meet in person,' replied Luther. The scars of his augmentation were obvious, along with visible bionics in the jaw, neck and behind the corneas. Despite these the Dark Angels officer was considerably smaller than his companions. Even so, he held himself in a way that meant he became the centre of attention, his noble face bearing a weight of dignity and gravitas beyond that which he gave up in physical presence. He extended a gauntleted hand with a whine of servos. 'Let me thank you again for acting as the linebreakers through the orbital stations. A necessary but bullish task, taken on without complaint or hesitation.'

'A role we will never shirk,' replied Typhon, taken aback by the words of gratitude. It was not often that others acknowledged the sacrifices made by those who so often placed themselves at the front of any assault. The Death Guard prided themselves on their stoicism, but the commander could not help but feel a small flush of pleasure at the words of praise.

'We should not keep the lord primarch waiting,' said Luther, turning slightly.

As easily as that, Typhon and the Dark Angel started down the colonnade, a dozen paces from Abaddon, their companions just behind. The others invited by the primarch fell into an awkward processional after them. Typhon knew then how Luther could quite easily be First Captain, or whatever Calibanites wanted to call it, without the benefits of a Space Marine physiology. He exuded leadership and confidence, borne with charisma and honed by many years of experience.

‘It is fascinating that we should find warriors of the Death Guard in an expedition of the Luna Wolves,’ said Luther.

‘An exchange of ideas,’ replied Typhon. ‘A cultural embassy, you could say. We learn of Cthonia and the battle doctrine of the Luna Wolves. We teach them of war as the Death Guard pursue it and try to avoid speaking about Barbarus.’

He laughed at his own joke and earned himself a quizzical look from Luther.

‘The Administratum designated Caliban a death world, yes?’ he asked the Dark Angel.

‘Of a sort.’ Luther looked confused, or perhaps defensive. ‘With the Lion’s aid, we slew all the Great Beasts of the forest and instilled order and peace.’

‘The toxic air of Barbarus kills most humans within thirty years. At higher altitudes it will kill in seconds. The Administratum had set the bar too low on *death* by the time they found us.’

Any potential reply from Luther was cut off by their arrival at the strategium. They passed beneath the great arch of the portal and out onto a massive balcony overlooking the main bridge of the *Vengeful Spirit*. As commander of the *Terminus Est*, Typhon was not awed by scale alone. What took his breath away as he stepped out into that rarefied air was the purpose to which the immense hall was dedicated – the demesne of a primarch, centre of an entire expedition fleet, throne room to one of the twenty kings-to-be of the galaxy.

The strategium was a dedicated deck overlooking the levels of the main bridge of the battle-barge, made of plain ironwork, tier upon tier of galleries stretching into the height of the *Vengeful Spirit.* Looking up at the vertiginous edifice reminded Typhon of the peaks of his home world, where the cruel Overlords had ruled from summit fortresses. In this realm, the lord made his roost very much in the middle altitudes.

In fact, if Typhon had not known better he would not have guessed that this was the realm of a demigod. It all seemed remarkably prosaic – phlegmatic, he had heard the Luna Wolves say often. No thrones, no tribunes or heralds, not even on the lauded occasion of a great victory. Where was the finery of rank? The filigree of pomp? The gold and scarlet of celebration?

It was reassuring to Typhon that there was no such aggrandisement. He shared the aesthetics of Mortarion, inasmuch as a complete absence of them. Function trumped all other considerations. He heard a grunt of appreciation from Vioss.

Typhon’s eye followed Abaddon at first, into the shadow beneath the overhang. Three others waited there, indistinct in the darkness.

‘The Mournival,’ he whispered to Luther. ‘Abaddon, Litus, Torgaddon, Janipur. The mailed fist around Horus’ velvet glove.’

The commander’s council were nothing more than darker shapes in the shadow, deliberately withdrawn from the spectacle about to take place.

Something red sparkled in the gloom – a bionic eye directed at Typhon for a few seconds. The Death Guard captain leaned closer to his companion. ‘It was Litus that adopted me when I arrived. Have you met any of the Mournival yet?’

‘I had the pleasure once,’ Luther replied, his tone sarcastic. ‘Abaddon thought our Legion would benefit from a stronger warrior code. He took offence when I laughed.’

Typhon glanced at the Dark Angel, surprised by this.

‘You laughed at Abaddon?’

‘I did not intend to, but the notion was ludicrous. I was Grand Master of the Order, a military organisation that dates back long before any warrior creed being peddled through some of the other Legions.’ Luther did not look around as he asked his next question. ‘Have they tried to introduce you to a warrior lodge yet?’

Typhon’s reply came smoothly and naturally. It was laughable that Luther thought Typhon needed to be inducted into the mysteries of the lodges. Long before any Luna Wolf had set foot on Davin he had known of the darker history of mankind. He needed no lessons about the nature of the universe, and the Other Place where the true power resided. A hellish upbringing on Barbarus and an early life spent exploring his psychic potential had taught him far more than fraternal rituals and rote-mouthed ceremonies.

He could have spoken of his role as the Second of the Seven Pillars, embodying the undying, otherworldly will of the Plaguefather amongst the brothers of his Legion. Not even Mortarion held sway in those cloistered gatherings. For many amongst the Luna Wolves, the compliance on Davin had been the fountainhead of inter-Legion brotherhood through the fraternal alliances modelled on that world’s warrior lodges. For Typhon, and a few others, an inter-Legion understanding had existed for much longer.

He was not a recruit, he was a recruiter. He wasn’t a messenger, he was the message.

But he did not say this, his answer was far simpler.

‘I can’t say.’

A movement drew Typhon’s eye and he realised that, miraculously, their host had been present all along. How he had not seen the primarch standing immobile on the dais was a mystery. It was as though a colossal statue had come to life. One moment the attendees had been spreading out across the ironwork balcony, marvelling at the immense structure. The next, there was a giant amongst them clad in white and burnished gold.

Furs were heaped upon his battleplate, and honours and medals from a dozen cultures recently brought to peaceful compliance. It was as though he lit up the entire strategium, and not just with the glitter of gold.

Horus Lupercal.

Primarch of the Luna Wolves – Typhon's surrogate master for the time, though it was the first occasion he had laid eyes upon the Legion commander. The experience was very different to the proximity of Mortarion, his own primarch. The leader of the Death Guard was imposing, unsettling even. His presence dominated the room no less than Horus, but with a shadow, not a sun. To come before grim-faced Mortarion, to look into eyes that had seen the worst that Barbarus could offer, was to confront the cold bleakness of death, the inevitability of ending.

Horus was life. He smiled as his gaze roamed across the assembling crowd, lips tight, eyes meeting those of everyone. They rested on Typhon for a moment, animated and amused and fatherly all at once. The Death Guard bowed his head, shamed that he felt more for this commander than his own. The light of Horus' gaze moved on.

Yet that was the greater aim, was it not? Horus was life. Horus was animation. Horus was the future. A fitting lord to represent the Master of Mankind, to sweep the galaxy into a new era of bountiful and joyous rebirth.

Like many others Typhon felt the urge to show obedience and respect and was halfway to lowering a knee to the primarch when Horus' voice boomed out.

'Don't any of you dare bow!' he declared with a laugh. The commander instead dipped his head in salute to the assembled warriors as he slowly turned from left to right.

'My thanks,' Horus continued, waving a hand to encompass all on the strategium. 'My deepest, heartfelt gratitude to each of you that has come here today. And beyond, to every soldier of the Emperor that fought to avert this disaster. I owe you a debt greater than words can express. I know that for all of you the performance of duty in the cause of humanity is reward enough, but nevertheless know that you carry the appreciation of the Emperor with you.'

So easily Horus spoke in the Emperor's name. Authority weighted every word.

The primarch grew sombre and turned away, his face lifting towards the largest hololithic display of the main bridge, which towered over the proceedings. The projectors flickered into life to show the world of Zaramund and the orbital space around it, dotted with runes and annotations of defences and Imperial ships.

'As I give thanks to those whose ears can hear it, so I pay respect to those that will never hear words again.' Horus tilted his face down a little, the lights of the strategium shining bright on his bald scalp. 'They sacrificed all, for the Emperor, for Zaramund, for their brothers and sisters. Remember them, and honour them.'

'Remember them, and honour them,' Typhon chorused with the others.

'Lieutenant DeBlessent!' the primarch called out as the honour guard of the Phalanxis completed the audience. All present turned as Horus' finger picked out the junior officer, who trembled as though struck through by a bolt. 'This man

here, and his command platoon, secured the gun batteries at Atreon. No orbital support, no Titans. Just twenty men and women with courage and a brilliant leader.'

Applause rippled out and Typhon clapped with them, impressed by the story. Securing Atreon had allowed Horus to move his fleet into closer orbit, hastening the surrender of the rebels by several days, if not weeks.

The young man seemed quite overwhelmed by this praise, not only from Horus but the thunderous ovation of several dozen Space Marines and his own companions. One of his soldiers put an arm around DeBlessent to steady the officer.

'And what about Shield-Lieutenant Loken?' Horus' change of focus spared DeBlessent any further discomfort as the eyes of all swung to a Luna Wolves officer standing close to the dais. 'A spirited boarding action against the *Vagaries of Fate*.'

Loken was far more composed, accepting the plaudits with a nod of the head and raised hand. He smiled warmly as several other Luna Wolves slapped his pauldrons in appreciation.

'And Captain Typhon, without whom we would all still be in orbit waiting to see who would dare the platforms' guns first.'

Typhon heard Vioss laugh and was then surrounded by a cacophony of cheers and applause led by the primarch. He flushed, remembering Luther's words about a thankless task. A warmth filled Typhon, which he loved and hated in equal measure. The feeling itself, the buoyant heat of approval, washed through him like a combat-stimm. With it came a self-knowing, self-loathing reaction that he should not respond so mawkishly to simple words. Yet Typhon's inner cynic, his melancholic shadow the Luna Wolves called it, could not resist the simple pleasure of praise from one as mighty as Horus.

Never had such words left the lips of Mortarion.

Others were being singled out, Horus finding each amongst the throng in an instant, their names and deeds spilling from his lips as easily as the commands that had sent them into the battle just fourteen days earlier. Typhon clapped and laughed, nodded or shook his head with sombre poise with everyone else, unable, and unwilling, to resist the air of brotherhood that united all on the strategium. From mighty Horus to the lowliest trooper of the Phalanxis, everybody present was part of the same endeavour, conjoined beneath the brilliance of their commander.

In time the primarch withdrew to join his officers in the Mournival, and the lesser beings of the retaliatory force were left to mingle and converse. Typhon was subdued and allowed Vioss to carry most of the conversation with Luther and the Dark Angels. For their part, the warriors of Caliban seemed content to allow their

leader to speak for them, only uttering a few words of clarification about the campaign or a particular action when directly addressed.

It was a surprise when there came a familiar voice at Typhon's shoulder.

'High words from the commander, Captain Typhon.'

The Space Marines turned to see a warrior clad in dark grey war-plate. Even amongst the fearsome warriors of the Legiones Astartes he struck an intimidating figure. His shaven head was covered with tiny script – lines of devotional text and doctrine from the Word Bearers Legion. His eyes were like sharp diamonds, piercing and bright, staring into Typhon rather than at him.

But Typhon knew the latest arrival well and with a laugh pulled the Word Bearers legionary close, slapping him hard on the shoulder.

'Erebus! There was talk that you fell during the capture of Platform Five. I am glad it was false rumour.' Typhon turned back to the others and regained his composure. 'Erebus of the Word Bearers, have you met Luther of Caliban?'

'I have not,' replied the First Chaplain. He extended a hand and Luther took it in a swift grip.

'My council,' said the Dark Angel, indicating each of his companions in turn. 'Chief Librarian Israfael, and Brother Zahariel of the Librarius. Merir Astelan, Chapter Master. And the Lord Cypher, my aide.'

'Greetings to you all. I would become better acquainted but I bear news for the commander.' Erebus gave Luther an odd look and then glanced at Typhon. 'We will speak again soon, Calas.'

Before any more could be said, the First Chaplain had disappeared into the shadows haunted by the Mournival. Typhon could not clearly see what happened but there was much gesturing and some agitation between Erebus and Abaddon. Eventually the First Captain stepped aside and the Word Bearer approached Horus. Only a few seconds passed before the primarch stepped out into the light again. Silence emanated like a ripple and into the vacuum of noise Horus spoke quickly but confidently.

'We are to be honoured,' Horus announced.

From his manner the casual observer might have thought that everything was as intended. Typhon knew better, and while all other eyes were on the primarch he saw the officers of the Mournival slipping away from the audience.

'One of my brothers will be joining us shortly,' the primarch continued. Despite the gravitas of the occasion, a spirited murmur of speculation broke out amongst the gathered warriors. Horus was not forthcoming with any further information and turned his attention to the consortium of Regulus' tech-priests.

Some minutes later the address systems of the *Vengeful Spirit* blared a clarion of welcome. Typhon moved to look back through the great portal of the strategium, but his view was obscured by the bulky war-plate of several Luna

Wolves Terminators. He could only see an honour guard of XVI Legion veterans hastily assembling under the instruction of Captain Janipur. Another minute passed and the warriors presented bolters and reaper cannons, volkite calivers and melta-weapons in honour of the arriving primarch.

The newcomer was clad toe to neck in black war-plate, chased with reddish gold and bright silver. His plastron was sculpted into the face of a great hunting cat, its mane forming into a ruby-clustered clasp for a cloak of white edged with black fur. His face was stern, eyes a startling green, fair shoulder-length hair swept back by an elegant iron band. At his waist hung a sword with an eagle's claw pommel, gripping a sapphire the size of a man's fist.

Lion El'Jonson. The Lion of Caliban. Primarch of the Dark Angels.

He advanced alone, no retinue or guard behind, eyes not once glancing at the honours presented to him. His jaw was set hard, hands bunched into fists. Typhon could feel anticipation turning to tension, polluting the atmosphere of the strategium.

A mutter from Luther drew Typhon's attention away from the Lion. The commander of the Dark Angels contingent was staring at his master as though a revenant stalked the corridor.

The Lion burst onto the strategium with long strides and all around him warriors lowered to one knee like grass flattened by a strong wind. Typhon felt the need to obey flowing into him and he did not resist it, dropping one leg to the floor along with the others.

Only Horus remained standing, saying nothing.

Luther pushed himself quickly back to his feet, but before he could say anything the Lion held up a hand to silence him. The primarch spoke without looking at his subordinate.

'I will deal with you momentarily.'

Typhon shuddered. The words had not been directed at him but he felt the heat of their rebuke like the backwash from an explosion. The target of the words, Luther bowed his head and clasped his hands together at his stomach.

'My brother, you have done that which none of our enemies has ever managed,' said Horus, his tone light. 'Taken me unawares.'

The Lion stopped a few steps from Luther, his eyes fixed on Horus. Typhon found himself sneaking glances at the two of them, holding his head rigid as if to move might betray his presence. All around him the strategium was shrouded in stillness and silence and though he knew the main bridge beyond had to be continuing as normal it was as though a bubble encompassed them all.

Typhon could feel the uncertainty of everyone else seething around him. Uncertainty and fear. The instincts of all were that of prey being discovered by predator. No mortal fear could mar the heart of a legionary, but in that moment

several dozen warriors of the Legiones Astartes were frozen by a dread-like desire to be anywhere else but on that iron-wrought balcony.

‘Where is the *Invincible Reason*, brother?’ asked Horus. ‘It grieves me that I did not fete your arrival with proper ceremony.’

‘Better that I came unheralded.’ Still the Lion did not look at his legionaries. ‘Chance brought me back to Zaramund. Imagine my surprise to see the ships of Caliban amongst the fleet of the Luna Wolves.’

Horus spread his hands, the apology unspoken.

‘Need was immediate. It is a credit to your warriors that they answered my call. They have fought bravely and well in the service of the Emperor.’

‘The lives of my warriors are not yours to spend like coin, Horus. Buy victories with the expense of your wolves, not my knights.’

Horus did not retort and the Lion did not wait for a reply. His gaze turned to Luther and the other Dark Angels. The primarch did not raise his voice, but his anger was palpable, a barely suppressed rage hidden behind softly spoken words.

‘My command was clear, your duties well prescribed. You were to remain on Caliban. You answer to no other but me, save the Emperor Himself.’

‘Of course, my liege,’ said Luther.

Typhon was impressed. A lesser man would have given reasons, made excuses. The Calibanite certainly could plead his case that answering Horus’ call to arms, the preservation of compliance at Zaramund, outweighed any standing orders and day-to-day duties. Luther said nothing in his defence, but met his primarch’s glare with a steady gaze. Only the familial bond between them could ever create such resolve. Typhon had been on the verge of weeping like a child when Mortarion had told him that the Librarius was an abomination and he was to be sent to the battle companies as a first-rank legionary.

‘You were my right hand, Luther, as I had been yours. I must know where my hand is at all times. I cannot move my gaze away only for my hand to take up a blade without my knowledge.’

‘Your will is my command, liege.’ Luther started to tremble, the words forced through quivering lips. ‘Your word alone shall stir me in the future.’

‘The sword must be sheathed, Luther. You will be returned to Caliban and there you will remain until I return or call for you. Your warships will come with me to the expeditionary fleet. With this disruption to Zaramund I need every vessel, and you will have no use for them.’

Luther looked despondent and swallowed hard. He silently nodded his acquiescence and dropped his gaze to the metal decking.

‘Prepare for your departure,’ the Lion told his Dark Angels. He spared one last glance at Horus, irritation twisting his lip for a second. ‘There will be no further celebration of insubordination.’

The Lion strode from the strategium without another look. The assembled Space Marines, freed from the glowering presence of the Lion, straightened and stood in the wake of his departure.

Typhon knew well that the creed to which he belonged, the hidden brotherhood within the Legions, had made no gains amongst the First Legion. He sensed opportunity and moved to Luther's side to lay a hand on the Dark Angel's arm.

'You are not alone, brother,' he assured Luther. 'There are those of us that know what it is like to feel the displeasure of our primarch. I have felt harsh words and fell judgement also.'

Luther did not say anything, but he gave Typhon a look of understanding. They held each other's gaze for a few seconds before Luther broke away and addressed his companions.

'We have our command, brothers. We return to Caliban, and there we will remain banished from the Lion's presence until our liege sees fit to release us.'

THE FIRST

ONE

Where is Zephath?

Ultramar, 011.M31

The lord of the First Legion sat as he so often sat, leaning back in his ornate throne of ivory and obsidian. The chair was part of him, a relic of Caliban that kept him connected to his home world, but also a statement of continuity. Even here, aboard the battle-barge *Honoured Deeds*, the throne assured his subordinates, and the Lion himself, that all was in order and as the primarch intended. His elbows rested upon the throne's sculpted arms, while his fingers were steepled before his face, just barely touching his lips. Unblinking eyes, the brutal green of Caliban's forests, stared dead ahead, watched a flickering hololith depicting the Five Hundred Worlds.

The great realm of Ultramar. The Kingdom of Guilliman. Bastion of the East. The Outer Wall. There were names to spare for the confederacy of worlds created by Roboute Guilliman and his Ultramarines of the XIII Legion. Now it had another.

Imperium Secundus.

A second chance at mankind's survival or an act of treachery that rivalled the rebellion of Horus? The Lion was still not sure, but he had sworn oaths upon his blade to act as its Lord Protector.

Sanguinius, the new emperor, the leader that Horus was meant to have been. A brother worthy of such oaths, perhaps the only one. The figurehead. If not for him, the Lion would have ended Imperium Secundus before it had begun as the act of heresy it could so easily have been.

Guilliman, the architect of the great project, statesman and administrator. The Lion could not argue against the achievements of Macragge's son; they were unparalleled except by the Imperium itself, possessed of grand vision, attention to detail and relentless energy.

For all his qualities, Guilliman lacked the steel to wield the empire he had created. Too prone to diplomacy, too eager to compromise. Too pragmatic, on occasion. Of all the primarchs, only Guilliman could have conceived of Imperium Secundus, and made it happen in so short a time. In others, such planning might be seen as cynical, but Guilliman's doctrine of the theoretical and the practical was an ideal, a principle he held dear.

Five Hundred Worlds. Lost among them was the Lion's prey. Konrad Curze, the Night Haunter, another of his demigod brothers. A madman in a superhuman body. A present danger to everything that they hoped to achieve with Imperium Secundus.

More than that, the matter between Curze and the Lion had become personal the moment the Night Haunter had tried to kill him at Tsagualsa. The shame of losing the primarch on Macragge still gnawed at the Lion. Death and anarchy had followed. Humbled him before his brothers, shown up his weakness.

Somewhere in the Five Hundred Worlds, Curze hid. The Lion would find him. He had grown up hunting down the worst beasts Caliban had harboured, with nothing more than his guile and strength. This was no different.

This time he would not let the Night Haunter escape.

Three others were in the room with their primarch. As with his throne from Aldurukh, the Lion had brought his other senior personnel across from the *Invincible Reason* – officers trusted and proven in many battles alongside the primarch. Stenius, now acting captain of the *Honoured Deeds*, his half-paralysed face assisted with bionics that glinted in the lights of the audience chamber. Farith Redloss, voted lieutenant of the Dreadwing, stocky, bald-shaven and clean-cheeked but for a trifurcated beard of black. Holguin, tall and lean like a finely bred hunting hound, red-dyed hair swept back with thick oil, chosen leader amongst the Deathwing veterans.

A host of commanders and lieutenants and captains and masters awaited the orders of the primarch, but none so keenly as the three Space Marines that shared his command chamber.

'Which one is Zephath?' asked Holguin, looking up at the hololithic display gently rotating above them.

'This one,' said Stenius. The captain had a cybernetic voice box, its tones straining to convey nuances of speech. Combined with the atrophied muscles of his face, it made him appear utterly emotionless, but the Lion knew the truth was far different. Stenius pressed a few runes on the control pod in his hand and one of the star systems was illuminated with a blue gleam. 'Terran designation, Sigma-Five-Ellipsis. Zephath. Standard isolated stellar body, one habitable, three inner core, five outer ring worlds. Secondary installations as standard.'

'Read the account again,' the Lion said quietly, moving his gaze to Holguin. The voted lieutenant lifted a data-slate.

'The Librarians reported "a great darkness falling upon a world of grey and blue. Flames unending, a cacophony of agony poured into the skies. Murder walking abroad, borne swiftly on midnight wings." They were able to identify Zephath as the source world, my liege.'

‘There are plenty of systems bleeding at the moment, my liege,’ said Redloss. ‘Remnants of Lorgar’s and Angron’s Legions have been left scattered all over the Five Hundred Worlds. What makes you think Curze is on Zephath?’

Only a handful of others knew of the Lion’s true purpose, his quest to right the mistake he had made in allowing Curze to escape. For the rest of the Dark Angels, to Sanguinius and Guilliman, the Lion and his warriors were sealing the borders, bringing firepower and authority to the systems at the fringes of the Five Hundred Worlds.

‘Little brother, I admire your straightforward manner, you know that,’ said the Lion. ‘It is the quality I admire most in the Dreadwing. But you must pay attention to the subtleties sometimes. “On midnight wings”. Have you heard a similar phrase before?’

‘The Night Lords sometimes describe themselves as “in midnight clad”, my liege,’ said Stenius.

‘It seems tenuous, my liege,’ said Redloss. ‘And it puts us right at the edge of the Five Hundred Worlds.’

The primarch accepted this opinion without comment. There was no doubt being voiced that he had not already considered. Contrary to this, Holguin’s contribution was notable by its absence. The Lion held out a hand to the fraternal leader of the Deathwing.

‘You vouch no opinion on this?’

‘My counsel is already known to you, my liege. I have nothing more to add.’

‘Of course. You think that we should not concern ourselves with Curze, but simply abandon bringing to justice one that has caused the deaths of so many of our brothers, and untold millions beside.’

‘I do not advocate giving up the hunt,’ Holguin replied hotly, face flushing. ‘I cannot count the companions of long years I lost to the Thramas conflict. I say that it is impossible. Curze could be anywhere. In all likelihood he has fled the Five Hundred Worlds and disappeared into the ruinstorm. Our time is better spent on our other duties, ensuring the security of the new Imperium.’

‘Curze is a threat to that security,’ said Redloss. ‘You can’t ignore that.’

‘I…’ Holguin took a breath, eyes moving from the Lion to Redloss and back again. ‘I said that my opinion is known, but it has no bearing on the current situation. My liege, I will obey your commands to the utmost of my ability, as I always have. None will fight harder for you.’

‘I know that,’ said the Lion. He stood and carefully laid a hand on Holguin’s shoulder guard. ‘Do not think I confuse disagreement with disloyalty. The debate openly remarked is of no concern to me. No, it is the masked dissent that we must always guard against.’

The Lion stepped away, passing through the projection of the hololith so that for a moment he was illuminated by the Five Hundred Worlds. He raised a hand as though to snatch Zephath from the map. Instead, he simply held it in his palm.

‘Your reasoning is sound, Holguin. Not quite five hundred worlds to choose from. Where would we start? A dozen searched already with not even a whisper of the Night Haunter. Shadows to be chased.’ The primarch’s hand swept through scores of star systems, a finger pointing at Macragge for a moment before moving back to Zephath. ‘I imagine one would retreat swiftly, pursued by a vengeful fleet. One would seek to put as much distance between oneself and Macragge as possible. As you claim, one might perhaps even try to break through the ruinstorm beyond the reach of the Sotha beacon’s light. That would be the reasonable thing to do.

‘But Curze is a creature unable to rise above his own wickedness, and his madness guides him. He cannot help but leave a trail of blood and horror. He must enact his spite at every turn. Curze desires nothing from Horus, he despises the Warmaster as much as the Emperor. A slave to paranoia and delusions that screams about freedom. You are wrong, Holguin, because you are sane and reasonable.’

‘Even so, my liege, how can we forecast the behaviour of the irrational? If Curze has no sense or pattern, that makes him even harder to find, not easier.’

‘Exactly. He is unpredictable, we cannot pre-empt his next attack and so we are forced to catch up with him. Curze is a predator, we will find him by the remains of his prey. It is why we cannot leave the hunt to conventional wisdom, but must rely upon the more ethereal, more intangible assets at our disposal. The warp-visions of the Librarians are not descriptions, they are half-dreams, formed as much from desire and emotion as fact. Curze can no more hide from them than he can from his own nature.’

Holguin still did not look convinced, but that had not been the Lion’s intent. The voted lieutenant had once again been truthful in his assertion of obedience and that was all the Lion desired. He shared his thoughts simply for the sake of giving form to them, allowing the vocalisation of abstract ideas to turn them into a plan of action.

‘I must prepare orders for the fleet, my liege,’ said Stenius. He considered the map for a few seconds. ‘Shall we assemble at Zephath directly, or nominate a staging system before final translation?’

The Lion thought on this as he returned to his throne. He sat down, hands on the arms of the massive chair, and looked at each of his officers.

‘Every ship is to make all speed for the Zephath system. They are to create an armed cordon around the core worlds. No ship leaves the system. No engagement

except to defend themselves or to enforce the blockade, as laid down in my standing orders. They will await the arrival of the *Honoured Deeds*.'

The others nodded in acceptance of his commands. The fleet had carried out such actions thirteen times already, but the Lion would accept no complacency.

'If Curze is there, I will deal with him personally.'

TWO

A terrible return

Caliban, 011.M31

Zahariel ran.

He never reached the surface.

Around him the tunnel twisted and buckled like an unbroken destrier, throwing him from his feet. The walls shuddered, stone and ferrocrete shucked away like a dead skin, revealing something fleshy and pulsating beneath. Crystalline deposits formed out of widening cracks like rapidly freezing ice. They glowed into cerulean life, bathing the scene with blue-purple shadows as the Librarian's surroundings continued to bend and move.

Something crashed against the side of his head. Out of reflex he threw up an arm, a golden shield of energy warding away the next block of masonry. The gigantic stones settled, cocooning him in debris. Blood trickled down his cheek and neck. Dazed, he fought against the sudden desire to rest.

A fight he lost, falling to semiconsciousness.

He heard scratching. At first he thought it was rocks settling, but then Zahariel heard the susurrant murmur of leaves. It was the branches in the forest, rubbing, bristling, the conversation of trees.

He had learned to listen to the forest as he had learned the tongue of his mother and father.

Tonight it was quiet. Tonight the souls of the trees slept, appeased.

He remembered the hunt. Tall warriors striding out in their mailcoats, las-lances charged and arqubines primed. Only half came back. But the Great Beast that had ravaged Densenoor and Vordenn was slain too, and now the forest could sleep again.

He could hear Nemiel snoring in the other cot. A wander-sage had come to the village two days before and Nemiel had listened to his tales all day and night, hiding when the word went out to bring him home. He had been banished to this small room and forbidden from watching the hunt set out, but Zahariel had helped him sneak from his prison for a short while. The wander-sage had told stories of Clemagh Feg, the wizard of the caverns, and Nemiel had suggested that he and Zahariel go out and look for the fabled Golden Cave.

Zahariel knew the stories almost as well as the wander-sage, he had heard them so often. They resonated, tales of the strange powers of the forest, of the call into the deeps that the gifted would hearken to. The tale of Stiken the Hoarfrost Warrior, who had been blessed with the ice-words. The tale of Sar Favon and the Gasping Toad, rescued from certain death by a mystical saviour.

And the dark tales, the ones that made Zahariel shiver to recollect, yet intrigued him the most. They were meant to be warnings, of what happened to disobedient boys and girls, the ones that went too far into the forest or delved too deep into the caves.

He wanted to explore, to go to the hidden groves, to seek out the twilight-men in their subterranean realm, because they were the ones that knew the origins of the stories. Knowledge from the time before the forest, before the village, before the coming of the Order.

Before the ascent of the Lion.

Before the arrival of the Legion.

Zahariel came to his senses, not sure for a moment where he was, bathed in the azure glow of crystal deposits. He could feel the pressure of thousands of tonnes of collapsed arcology balanced precariously over him. More than just his psychic shield must have saved him – fortune, then? That seemed unlikely. The dream of the old tales, stories he had not thought of for decades, had to have deeper meaning. A memory suppressed by his Librarius training now allowed to rise again.

A reminder that there had once been other powers in the dark places beneath the world.

Had they ever left?

A scraping caused Zahariel to turn as he rose to one knee. The shifting stones had formed a sort of corridor, a crack in the debris leading roughly north.

A few metres away stood a dead woman. It was clear she was dead because her head flopped upon her shoulder, eyes half closed. There was also the blood staining her blue tunic and grey trousers. A normal human could not lose that much blood and live.

The ground trembled again as Zahariel tried to get to his feet. The walking corpse swayed like a reed, sustained by the force that rippled out from the depths of the ruined arcology.

There were other figures behind her. Men and women, a few children. All were equally dead. Workers in unirobes and coveralls. Some had mining gear. What had become of the people from the abandoned excavation above suddenly became clear.

More emerged from the shadows, nearly three dozen.

Standing, Zahariel pulled free his pistol. He had twelve bolts in the magazine, and a spare at his belt.

But he did not need physical ammunition.

Holding up his other hand, he allowed his mind to pierce the invisible dam that kept the terrible energies of the warp at bay. Immediately his thoughts swirled with power. Zahariel's splayed fingers crackled with purple lightning, tiny sparks leaping from fingertip to fingertip, his nails gleaming like light filaments.

The ground ceased its movements and the walking corpses withdrew, fading from view into the bluish gloom. Zahariel's perfect vision scoured the darkness for the other signs he had been expecting.

Worms. The deadly worms that had assaulted him and the other Dark Angels the time that they had driven the Ouroboros from these caverns.

There was no sign of the beasts, not the giant queens, nor the workers or soldiers.

There was also no indication that the sorcerers that had brought forth the Ouroboros had survived. Zahariel had seen no evidence of their presence in the settlement above – both he and Lord Cypher had mentioned the threat and had taken pains to seek out anything that might betray the presence of more Terran warp-wielders.

There was nothing. Zahariel's psychic sense picked up no manipulation of the warp in the vicinity.

He detected something else, though.

It wasn't a psychic effect, not as such. It was hard to pinpoint, more akin to an atmospheric condition, a psychic wind he might have said to the non-gifted. It was more than a wind, it was…

It was a void. An emptiness. An *absence* of psychic power.

It was growing stronger. The lightning in Zahariel's hand guttered into sparks and then died as a great barrier pressed in around him, squeezing out the psychic energy he had tapped into. He tried again, releasing his thoughts from the flesh, but they rebounded painfully back into his skull, forcing him to the ground with a cry. He held his hands to his temples as the inward pressure increased.

His hearts beat faster, a response to danger that others might mistake for fear. It was, in a Space Marine, simply a physical reaction tied to no psychological baggage. His body was merely ready to fight, his mind racing.

No. Zahariel was lying to himself.

It *was* fear that sped his pulse.

The blackness of the anti-warp around him isolated the Librarian from all sensation, making him feel utterly alone. He could not probe its depths, its mass so huge, so intangible that it was beyond measure – a thing beyond mortal comprehension, even that of a Librarian. He did not know what was happening;

nothing in his training had prepared him for this sensation of helplessness and isolation.

He swallowed hard as the revelation came to him.

The psychic null was not an effect of the Ouroboros. It *was* the Ouroboros! Its incorporeal body coiled and twined through the heart of Caliban, both leeching and leaking psychic energy into and from the warp and material universe.

More than that, it was all around Zahariel.

He would not see the worms, could not. They were a physical manifestation of the Ouroboros, the bubbles on the surface of the water that told of the predatory presence in the depths below.

Zahariel looked again at the gouges and cracks in the ferrocrete around him, taking in the pulsing mass behind the tiles and masonry, and no Legion training could prevent the cold chill of realisation.

There was a reason he could not see the Ouroboros. He was not on the surface, but in the depths. He was within the gut of the Conqueror Worm.

He was *inside* the warp beast.

The light of the crystals faded and darkness reigned.

Zahariel fell.

THREE

The Angels of retribution

Ultramar

The screen of the visual feed was blank, but the voice of Redloss boomed out across the audio system of the primarch's chamber. Holguin stood to one side, watching his liege as much as he listened to the transmission. The primarch sat in his throne as had become his habit again of late. He listened intently to Redloss' report, features impassive.

'*There was nothing to be done. The* Monarch's Glory *and three corvettes arrived first and detected a battle-barge-class vessel and four escorts in orbit.*' Gunfire crackled and the growl of engines cut intermittently across the voted lieutenant's words. He grunted heavily, presumably swinging his broad-headed axe into some foe. '*They tried to bring the enemy to battle but the traitor vessels fled. I assume they had psykers with them and knew the rest of the fleet was incoming, else why would they retreat when they had more firepower? Augur intercepts mark the enemy vessels as belonging to the World Eaters, with one Word Bearers ship.*'

'They left the system?' The Lion leaned forward as he asked the question.

There was a delay followed by muffled shouting and the distinct crack of armour splitting. Redloss hissed a curse.

'*Headed directly out-system and jumped as soon as they could, my liege.*' Redloss paused, this time to gather his breath. '*Obviously not all of the traitors left… I will try to keep some for interrogation but these World Eaters are not making it easy. The Navigators have compiled course estimates and rangings. Their best guess is that the ships departed on a course towards Exila-Sigma-Eighteen. No other habitable systems within seven light years.*'

'Best guess,' said Holguin, letting slip a sigh. The Lion pursed his lips in annoyance but did not say anything. 'If Curze had been here, he is gone now.'

The speakers rumbled with the detonation of an explosion close to Redloss, followed by a sudden silence.

'Farith?' Holguin kept his voice calm despite his rising concern. 'Brother, what happened?'

It was a tense few seconds until the vox snarled back into life.

'*Pardons, my liege, it appears the enemy have a Vindicator.*'

The vox fell quiet again though the link was still open, leaving Holguin in silence with his lord. Several minutes passed, the thrum of the starship's engines occasionally broken by the thump of some heavy weapon across the vox-link or the snarl and grunts of Redloss. Brief bursts of static indicated when the voted lieutenant broadcasted on a different channel.

'Curze was never here,' the Lion said eventually, speaking slowly, deep in thought. 'He is not a coward. The opposite, in fact. Rash and intemperate. Willing to risk much to prove himself right.'

Holguin had warned that the chase to Zephath was likely pointless and had been proven correct. Any statement to that effect would simply be juvenile, and certainly not welcomed by his lord. He sought for something conciliatory to say, but was equally aware that platitudes would also earn the primarch's displeasure.

He chose to say nothing.

The vox burst into fresh life with a garbled screech and then the calm voice of Farith.

'*Someone came here*,' said the Dreadwing officer. '*Those ships were not empty. We have only sporadic contact from the surface. There seems to be nothing left of any global command structure. Orbital defences have been totally destroyed.*'

'There is nothing much we can do here,' said Holguin. He stepped aside as the Lion moved to the controls. A chart of the Five Hundred Worlds appeared on the screen. 'Do we pursue them to Exila-Sigma-Eighteen? Or look elsewhere?'

'*There is something you need to see, my liege, before you make that decision*.' A signal interrupted the map projection. In its place the link panned across a ruined cityscape. '*This is a live feed from a legionary from the* Diligent Servant, *one of the first to land on Zephath.*'

The buildings had been constructed from red brick, their facades plastered and painted in bright colours. Piles of rubble several storeys high were all that was left of most of them, while here and there a stair or chimney still stood, alongside the twisted metal skeletons of taller structures. The ground was heavily cratered. Holguin recognised large areas flattened by orbital attack, but within these were smaller wounds from artillery and gunship strikes.

'Gratuitous,' he said. 'I don't see how…'

He trailed off as the viewpoint moved. The legionary advanced over the mound of a collapsed dwelling, here and there a limb or face jutting from the shattered, charred bricks. It was nothing Holguin had not seen before, and it was not this loss of life that silenced him.

Beyond the ruin stood something else. It was difficult to make out at first, obscured by distance, the smoke and dust confusing Holguin's sense of perspective. It was pale, towering over the flattened city.

The Lion manipulated the controls and the view expanded to encompass the whole display. Holguin could now see the bright blue flare of jump packs as assault squads crossed the ruins, adding some scale to the edifice. Gunships circled, adding more depth to the image.

‘It must be half a kilometre high,’ said Holguin. ‘What is it?’

The Lion remained silent, eyes narrowed as he watched the unfolding scene.

A sudden acceleration, an assisted jump, moved the legionary closer. His companions bounded alongside, their boosted leaps covering fifty metres at a time. Three more jumps and then the squad came to a halt. The transmission carried no sound from the vox-channel, but it was clear to see that they were perturbed. They exchanged looks with each other, some of them pointing.

The view magnified. The Lion sucked in a ragged breath between his teeth.

The tower was made of skeletons. A thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand, it was impossible to tell. Skulls dotted the macabre spire and as the magnification increased again Holguin could even make out letters made from fingers and the tiny bones found in the ears. He could not read what they said, but he did not need to.

‘Secure the area for my arrival,’ the Lion said, his voice the whisper that Holguin had learned meant his lord was subduing a deep rage.

Up close, the towers were even more disgusting. The stench of dead matter and dried blood carried to the Lion on a charnel breeze. Rubble crunched beneath his tread as he approached the grotesque edifice. He looked up, squinting against the bright sun. The fine summer weather made the deathly monuments even more incongruous. In the middle and far distance, other slender ivory fingers jutted towards cloudless indigo skies. This was a landscape that should be shrouded in darkness and storms, not bathed in warm sunlight.

‘It gets worse.’ Redloss’ voice was flat.

‘Worse?’ The Lion whispered the word, fingers curling into fists at his sides.

‘I double-checked our charts from Macragge,’ said Redloss. ‘This was Antilasta, a city of five million. They’ve yet to find anybody alive.’

‘Why?’ Holguin could think of no other question. ‘This is not conquest, it is slaughter. What purpose could it serve?’

‘Again you seek reason where none exists.’ The Lion took a deep breath. ‘But there is another logic at work.’

‘Could this be the action of Curze?’ asked Holguin, unable to draw his eyes from the tower.

Redloss led them into the closest structure. The arched gate was high enough for the Lion to pass within unhindered. Inside he discovered what had happened with the rest of the bodies. Skin was pulled taut across the ossuary framework like the tapestries of Aldurukh, still blemished and featured, carefully taken

whole from the victims. Mouldering entrails hung like decorations, creating disturbing geometries and curving letter-shapes.

‘No,’ said the primarch in answer to Redloss’ earlier question. His gaze moved around the tower, taking it all in, forcing himself to examine the bloody handiwork of the Word Bearers, for surely this was the industry of Lorgar’s warriors. ‘This required much labour. The World Eaters and Word Bearers would not do the bidding of Curze and he would not wish to command them. He has abandoned even his own Legion, a solitary monster now.’

The Lion’s stare became sharper, his thoughts returning to the present.

‘This…’ He waved a hand towards their surroundings. ‘This is deliberate, ritualistic. It is not simply horror for its own sake. It served or serves a purpose. We have seen things that defy normal comprehension, Holguin. This is part of that new reality.’

‘If it is not Curze, and he has not been here, do we pursue the perpetrators, my liege?’ asked Redloss.

‘Have the Navigators refine their calculations,’ the Lion said with a slow nod, the command directed at Holguin. ‘Best guesses are insufficient.’

The voted lieutenant was about to acknowledge the command and depart when a chime sounded from the device he was carrying. Holguin proffered the long-range comm-unit to the primarch.

‘Stenius, my liege,’ he said, handing over the bulky device to the Lion, in whose palm it fitted perfectly.

‘*Apologies for the intrusion, my liege,*’ said Stenius. There was a slight delay on the image, so that his lips did not quite move with his voice. ‘*We are receiving contact from the* Colgrevance. *Lieutenant Neraellin wishes to speak to you directly.*’

‘The *Colgrevance*. A frigate patrolling orbit over the southern continental archipelago. Interesting,’ the Lion said after a moment’s thought – the commander of a patrol ship was far enough down the chain that it was unusual to request a direct link to the primarch. ‘Grant him audience.’

Stenius’ face disappeared to reveal an image of Neraellin on the bridge of his frigate, some distance from the vid-capture unit, speaking with one of his subordinates. He turned in surprise as the comms officer called to him. Most of the lieutenant’s left cheek and his nose were a messy swirl of old scar tissue.

‘*My liege!*’ He bowed his head three times in formal greeting, more hurriedly than decorum dictated so that he appeared to be nodding to himself. ‘*I did not expect to be put through to you so soon.*’

‘You have my full attention, lieutenant.’

The Lion suppressed a smile as Neraellin momentarily looked like a mouse spotting the diving hawk. The lieutenant rallied in a few seconds, cleared his

throat and gestured to his officer – a second later an image of a cloudy sky over barren coastline replaced his face.

‘*Our initial patrol detected a strange energy signature in a locale close to the coast of the southern continental mass, my liege.*’ The display split to show a rough schematic of Zephath’s southern oceans, but the lack of clarity of the live visual feed obscured any detail. ‘*I ordered a gunship flyover to see if perhaps it was an outlying settlement or research post. This is what they witnessed.*’

Through the eye of the pict-feed the Lion could just about make out high walls, surrounded by a ring of fortified towers, bunkers and other defences. There appeared to be significant mining and earthworks in the surrounding area, as though someone had been digging for something in the ice-crusted ground.

‘An abandoned defence fortress,’ said the primarch.

Neraellin said nothing, and in a few more seconds the reason became clear. Stabs of light and blossoms of explosions seared across the display. The view veered violently as the pilot took evasive action, and then two beams of light, unmistakably lascannons, converged on the gunship. For several seconds the view spun, the ground rushing up to meet the camera before everything went dark.

‘Automated defences?’

‘*No, my liege. Augur data that accompanied the feed confirmed life signals. The fortress has a garrison.*’

‘Perhaps Zephathian locals?’ suggested Holguin. ‘They have been attacked, it would be likely they would mistake our ships for more traitors.’

‘The Zephathian defences were totally crippled, my liege,’ said Redloss. ‘Despite the madness we’ve encountered on the surface, legionaries attacked this world. The assault was conducted with ruthless precision.’

‘The traitors are still on Zephath.’ The Lion growled, a bass noise that reverberated in the pit of Holguin’s stomach.

‘Their ships abandoned them, just like the ones that contested the landing,’ concluded Redloss. ‘Cowards.’

‘Or hoped to draw our attention away from the planet,’ countered the Lion. ‘We assumed they detected the incoming fleet and feared our numbers. It is possible they thought the first ships were a scouting flotilla and wanted to be pursued, so that Zephath was not subjected to close scrutiny.’

‘They have unfinished business on this world,’ said Holguin. ‘It has kept them here too long.’

‘A misjudgement they will regret for a short time only,’ said the primarch, standing. He adjusted the comms-pack to transmit a multi-channel broadcast. ‘Stenius! What is the latest tally of the fleet?’

‘*Seventeen vanguard vessels, my liege.*’ There was a muffled comment from someone else and Stenius paused while he accessed the latest data. ‘*Correction,*

we have eighteen vanguard vessels in orbit. Eight main fleet vessels. Four dedicated transports and half a dozen ships from the support flotilla.'

'Have all surface-assault capable ships stand to and await drop orders, captain.'

'That's nearly ten thousand Dark Angels, my liege,' said Holguin. 'There cannot be more than a few hundred traitors in that fortress.'

'Your mathematics skills are exemplary, Holguin.' The Lion returned his attention to the cross-channel display. 'Captain Neraellin?'

The *Colgrevance*'s commander had witnessed the exchange in respectful silence and took a moment to realise he was being addressed.

'*It's, uh, Lieutenant… Lieutenant Neraellin, my liege,*' he said, obviously regretting the need to correct his primarch.

'You are mistaken, captain,' the Lion said. A massive hand rested on the pommel of the sword at his waist. 'I would not give the honour of leading the first drop assault to a lieutenant.'

To his credit, Neraellin quickly caught up with the primarch. There was no smile, no look of triumph, just a respectful nod of acceptance.

'*I will do honour to your decision, my liege,*' the newly promoted captain replied solemnly.

'You will,' said the primarch. He marched from the tower and headed back towards his Stormbird, the others following with hurried strides. 'Your first duty will be to provide me with all of the strategic data you have gathered so far. Stenius, assemble the fleet for surface assault. Farith, gather the senior commanders. I will brief in one standard hour. Retribution is at hand.'

The Lion was true to his word. A stiff wind plucked at his cloak as his gaze followed Captain Neraellin's gunships from the open assault ramp of a Stormbird.

Most of the traitor stronghold was already rubble and molten slag, the defences levelled in the same manner that had systematically destroyed the cities of Zephath. The last of the plasma warheads rained down, blossoming in miniature suns across the flattened remnant of the fortress. Despite the damage on the surface, it was likely that the bulk of the enemy were sheltered underground. The bombardment had taken out anti-aircraft emplacements and gun towers but as always it remained the task of the legionaries to assault the remains.

For all that he had honoured Neraellin with the vanguard attack, the primarch was not willing to take any other risks with the execution of the traitors. As the captain's Thunderhawk touched down ahead, the primarch leapt from his gunship, dropping the last fifty metres. The glass-like remains of a bunker cracked under his landing while the jets of the landing Stormbird scattered the fog of ash, coating the Lion's face and hair with light grey.

The smell was oddly welcoming, reminding the primarch of the fire-warmed great halls of Aldurukh in winter, save for the slight undercurrent of charred flesh.

A breeze came down the mountain valley bringing a crisp coldness of icy water, coniferous forest and fresh snow.

The Lion looked up and smiled. The cloud layer had been burned away by the vehemence of the lances and plasma fire from orbit, leaving a sun-filled sky. Against the indigo he could see the shapes of gunships and drop pods. More importantly, so could the survivors of Zephath. They would tell generations to come of the day the Dark Angels arrived as their saviours.

The air was thick with the descending machines of war, pinpricks of plasma trails and arrestor jets almost lost against the midday sun. The Lion had chosen noon as the moment vengeance would be exacted. No dusk or dawn assault, but a falling blade lit bright by the light of day.

‘Ingress, sublevels to the left!’ barked Neraellin, gesturing to his squads. ‘Melta-teams!’

The emplacements beneath the citadel had been well built and had resisted the worst of the orbital assault. As with their initial attack, the traitors had followed the principles of the Legiones Astartes, a strange adjunct to their barbaric genocide. However, a few metres of surface earth had been scoured clear in places, revealing curved ferrocrete tunnels and skeletal ferrite supports. Neraellin and three legionaries converged over one of these exposed sections.

The legionaries carried multi-meltas, bulky weapons with short range but devastating potential. At their captain’s command they fired at the revealed tunnelwork, the combined blast of high-powered radiation turning the ferrocrete to vapour, leaving a roughly circular hole three metres across.

The Lion arrived just as Neraellin was about to jump into the passageway.

‘Captain!’ Neraellin turned as the Lion arrived at his side and drew his sword.

‘My liege?’ There was the slightest tremor in his voice. It was likely excitement, but perhaps concern that the primarch had changed his mind.

The Lion waved the captain to proceed.

‘Leave none alive.’

Bolts whipped past Farith Redloss as he strode across the broken and melted stones of an internal wall. The heavier scream of reaper autocannon rounds punctuated the din. The fire came from the slit of a bunker a hundred metres ahead, which by some quirk of physics had survived the plasma shells and torpedo attack. It was just one of several defensive emplacements that protected a secondary citadel, itself constructed over one of the mine workings delved into the lower slope of the mountains.

The Lion was still clearing the undertunnels of the main fortress, leaving others of the command council to sweep clear the remaining surface structures. So far it had been light work, but Redloss looked up at eight ranks of reinforced walls and buttressed towers carved from the flank of the mountain.

Larger guns added their fire to the defence as the Chapters of the 20th, 30th and 31st Orders advanced into range. The thunder of artillery pieces echoed for a few seconds before the shells detonated on the cracked valley floor.

Redloss joined Paladin Xavis of the 20th Order, who observed the stronghold from the corner of a Land Raider's track housing. The black paint of the heavy transport's frontal armour was scratched and pitted from direct hits and scattered shrapnel impacts, the ground around churned with mortar craters. Evidently Xavis had been stuck there for several minutes.

'Tricky,' said Redloss, using the lascannon sponson mounting to clamber up onto the top of the Land Raider. The Space Marine manning the heavy bolter at the top hatch turned in surprise. 'Eye and weapon to the enemy, legionary!'

While Redloss watched, a squadron of Dark Angels tanks opened fire on the closest line of rampart. A half-formed wall of blue light met the attack. Las-beams and shells sparked harmlessly against the energy shield a few metres from the fortification.

'Any idea how many of them are in there?' he asked Xavis.

'A few dozen, as best we can tell from scan data.' The Paladin shook his head. 'Enough to man the stronghold. We could have another ten thousand warriors, it makes no difference if we cannot bring the numbers to bear on the target. It could take days, weeks to dig them out. Voted lieutenant, I am requesting your brotherhood's intervention and relinquish authority to your command for the duration of the impending action.'

The Dreadwing, like the other 'Wings' of the Dark Angels, owed its existence both to the old formations of Terra and that 'brotherhood' of the Order from Caliban. It existed beneath the structure of the *Principia Belicosa* that shaped the Legiones Astartes, a substrate of organisation and tradition that predated the adoption of the Order of Caliban and even the amalgamation of the Six Hosts of Angels – the Hexagrammaton – but was also a result of both.

'Are you sure, brother?' Redloss looked down at Xavis. 'I will not be gentle with your warriors. Do you wish to consult with our liege?'

'A swift action will be less costly, I believe. The Lion granted me full tactical command and I am exercising my right to invoke a Dreadwing assault.'

'Fine, I just wanted you to be sure.'

With a thumb, Redloss signalled for the cupola gunner to clamber out of his position, allowing the voted lieutenant to lower himself down into the Land Raider. He made his way directly to the vox-station and attuned the transmitter to his personal channel – the Dreadwing command frequency.

'The glass turns, the grains fall,' he broadcast, signalling to the other members of his brotherhood that the Dreadwing was to assemble. 'Are you reading me, *Intolerant*?'

‘*This is Tarazant, Dreadbringer.* Intolerant *is at tation forty-alpha. Two minutes for orbital adjustment to your position.*’

‘I need corridor fire, one kilometre breadth, two long. Initiate on my command.’

‘*Main weapon system will engage on your command.*’

Acknowledging this, Redloss turned his attention to the other movements of his warriors. From different parts of the battle line, a selection of tanks and squads broke formation and headed towards the Land Raider. Those fighting below the surface with the primarch knew better than to disengage – the transmission was a call to arms for those that could respond, not an overriding command.

He marched down the compartment and activated the assault ramp. As it lowered, revealing the walls of the enemy fortress blossoming with the muzzle flare of large cannons, he received the affirmation from Tarazant that the *Intolerant* was in position over the battlezone.

Xavis saluted as they passed on the ramp.

‘Don’t get carried away,’ said the commander of the 20th Order. ‘We might want that fortress ourselves.’

‘Too late for caveats, Brother-Paladin,’ Redloss replied.

He stepped out onto ground thawed by the engines of the tanks and the detonations of shells. The enemy bombardment was directed a few hundred metres off to his left, where an aegis-line of fortifications had been dropped from orbit. Fire between the companies sheltering in the bastion and the outer defences of the stronghold flickered in the still moments between earth-ripping detonations.

Redloss himself did not fully understand the origins of the formation for which he was the elected leader, being a son of Caliban. There had been secrets and mysteries revealed to him by his predecessor, a Terran of Albia called Constantine, but little substantive history. Other details he had gleaned through conversations with his fellow voted lieutenants in the other Wings, but even now, less than two centuries after its inception, the Dreadwing’s past was surprisingly opaque and veiled with metaphor.

As the voted lieutenant understood, during the War of Unification the Six Hosts had each been created by the Emperor for a specific task, or from a particular type of warrior. Their names, if they had any, were unknown to Farith – the Wings were an adoption of Order terminology. These Hosts did not fight alone, being too specialised for general warfare on Terra and during the initial stages of the Great Crusade. Instead, elements of each Host were combined into battle groups of different sizes and designations. As and when required, the Hosts provided their troops to these armies depending upon the military need.

Now the brotherhoods could be called upon to provide their expertise to a field commander, as Xavis had invoked.

The ground trembled and a shadow fell across the Land Raider as a Spartan assault carrier arrived beside Redloss. Its black livery was marked with the icon of the Dark Angels and in the pommel of the sword of the Legion symbol sat a skull-in-hourglass device that matched the iconography of the voted lieutenant. The same would be found somewhere in the heraldry of all that belonged to the Dreadwing.

The Spartan was a larger cousin of the Land Raider, a massive assault transport capable of carrying twenty-five Space Marines. Its tracks were thick with grit and mud torn up from the frozen ground, its exhaust vents steaming like a dragon's maw. Sponson-mounted quad lascannons sent a ripple of fire into a nearby bunker, slashing through the ferrocrete with ruby beams.

A hatch in the slab flank opened to reveal Danaes of the Third Order. The lieutenant-ascendant of the Dreadwing wore Terminator armour that almost filled the accessway with its bulk.

'Hail the Dreadbringer,' Danaes said formally, taking a step back so that Redloss could pull himself aboard his command vehicle.

'Let the lesson continue,' said Redloss, ascending into the massive transport. The troop compartment was only half full, carrying the five warriors of Redloss' pantheon and five more Terminators led by Halswain. Each armour-clad warrior sported a heavy weapon of some kind, their livery marked with the icons of half a dozen different squads from two different Orders.

He sat down, long axe across his lap, and gestured for his second-in-command to stand beside him. 'What do you recall of our last conversation, Danaes? Tell me of the Hexagrammaton.'

'We spoke of the early years, on Terra,' said Danaes. 'You told me that the warriors of each Host could be called upon when a particular threat or situation presented itself. Like now. The leader of a Host, chosen by his sect-brothers rather than appointed by the Emperor in those times, would assume temporary command of a battle or campaign so that their expertise could be deployed fully. But I do not understand what happened to the Hexagrammaton in the other Legions. Why did it persist only within the First?'

'That is a mystery I cannot solve,' replied Redloss. 'For reasons only he knows, the Emperor chose not to continue with the Six Hosts and instead created the Principia Belicosa to structure the Legiones Astartes. The old ties of the brotherhoods continued in the First Legion, though, and so the Six Hosts persisted in name and function. Being created from scratch, the later Legions were never built upon this foundation.'

Redloss was entrusted with strategies and technologies that were for him alone to unleash. Not only did he possess the temporal command, he had been given the spiritual authority to do so. He had learned their ways and means from the hand and lips of Paladin Constantine and passed on the same to his peer-nominated successor, Danaes.

Redloss' shadow when the Dreadwing was assembled, it was Danaes' duty to accompany the voted lieutenant and take command the moment Redloss was unable to lead. This 'last breath' protocol ensured no interruptions to the chain of command – Danaes had his own student, Halswain, who would take his place if the lieutenant-ascendant died before Farith, and so forth, with each warrior of the inner echelon accompanied by and tutoring his replacement.

'Ready to kill some traitors?' Redloss asked his warriors, rewarded with growled affirmatives and nods. He activated the comm-net. 'You know me, I know you, brothers of the Dreadwing. We see our target before us. You don't need me to tell you what must be done. We will paint our glory in the blood of the foe. Until the last traitor in that stronghold is dead, this field belongs to the Dreadwing. Tarazant?'

'*On station, Dreadbringer.*'

'Darkness falls.'

FOUR

We are death

Ultramar

Nearly fifteen hundred warriors of the Dreadwing had answered Redloss' call to arms. Many rode in Rhinos, Land Raiders, Spartans and other transports, but several hundred formed up on foot behind the armoured machines of their brothers.

Engines died and fifteen hundred warriors stilled themselves, each reaching into his thoughts, remembering the teachings of the Dreadwing.

From external vocalisers and the address systems of the vehicles a low chant began.

It was almost nothing at first, a sigh that became a whisper. The cold wind flicked hourglass-shaped pennants and brought a flurry of snow across the black of war-plate. The whisper became a murmur, the words still indistinct. Aboard the Spartan, Redloss cross-broadcast the transmissions from the Dreadwing network to all non-Dark Angel frequencies, blanketing the airwaves with the sound of his warriors.

In low orbit, the *Intolerant* turned its prow surfacewards, a spear of black and gold. Vanes like the vertebrae of a kilometre-long saurian extruded from its flanks.

The chant resolved itself into words, still quiet but firm, the first rumble of thunder from a storm in the distance. The Dreadwing did not come in secret, they hid nothing of their purpose. Their strength did not come from righteous ire. They needed no justification. They needed no aggrandising.

The Dreadwing simply were.

We have come, they proclaimed. *We are death.*

Energy flared along the length of the *Intolerant*, arcs of purple and blue that leapt from one vane to the next, moving from stern to bow in succession. A few seconds later another surge of lightning rippled down the starship. With each few passing seconds the pause between flashes shortened.

The voices of the Dreadwing became regular speech, the words slow and insistent, uttered between teeth gritted in wolfish grins.

We have come. We are death.

We have come. We are death.

Farith added his voice to the chant, his immense war-axe in one hand, the other forming a fist that gently struck the beat on the console of the comm-unit.

‘We have come. We are death.’

The other Dark Angels fell back, guided by the command of their Paladins. Where gaps in the line appeared, the Dreadwing re-formed, transports moving forward, squads repositioning, the wall of black consolidating even as rockets and shells crashed down around them. And there they stayed, motionless, the chant as unbroken as the line.

We have come. We are death.

The mantra was insistent, loud, growing quicker and quicker.

The pulses of cerulean fire that enveloped the *Intolerant* were almost constant. Above the battlefield, through the break in the clouds, it seemed as though a violet star sprang into life.

We have come. We are death.

A shout. A promise, not a threat. Redloss’ fist was beating hard, denting the metal of the console. Along the line, gauntlets beat in unison on chest plastrons and against the hulls of the tanks. Every half a second, with metronomic precision, a crash of metallic thunder rolled across the battlefield, swamping the sound of lasblasts and autocannon shells.

We have come. We are death.

As one, the Dreadwing took five paces in time to the chant while the tanks snarled forward alongside.

We have come. We are death.

The *Intolerant* was awash with swirling energy, the void around it buckling and twisting like a warped mirror. The flare of power cast impossible shadows against the vacuum of space.

We have come. We are death.

The Dreadwing advanced again, walking forward at a quick march, every warrior in step, their vehicles taking the brunt of fire from the redirected weapons of the traitors’ bunkers.

Redloss pulled himself up the ladder to the command hatch atop the Spartan and ascended to the roof of the vehicle. It ground forward in time with the advance, engines like the rumble of a dormant giant. He lifted up the great hourglass-headed axe in both hands, pumping his arm along with the chant.

‘We have come!’ roared Farith. ‘We are death!’

The *Intolerant* opened fire.

From the ground Redloss watched the descending bolt of darkness. It looked like a negative sun, a sphere of black that slid across reality rather than dropped with mass, slower than a shell or missile, impossibly dense yet intangible.

We have come. We are death.

The chant reverberated along the valley one last time before the *Intolerant*'s bolt struck the ground. The darkness vanished, slipping past the ice and mud and for several heartbeats nothing happened.

The rift blast expanded in an instant, a lightning-wreathed oval of discordant energy that filled the space between the Dreadwing and the stronghold, its crackling edge no more than a hundred metres from Redloss. A screech like a god's whetstone split the air, speakers and vox-units emitting their own piercing feedback wails in reply. A million tonnes of earth and ice sparkled in blue suspension, every grain of rock and mote of ash shimmering with tiny arcs of warp power.

In the depths of the rift shapes moved almost unseen – the broadest sweep of a face or raking claw. They appeared more like afterimages, rendered in three dimensions against the stretched skin of reality, pressing to pass through a veil only made visible by their presence.

Redloss held his breath, awed by the beauty of the moment, as he always was.

An instant later the warp field collapsed like a storm bubbling down into a single drop of rain. Dirt, snow, ferrocrete, flesh, metal, ceramite, bone, all disappeared with a boom that eclipsed all other sounds of battle. Silence followed as Farith's auto-senses shut out the reverberations from the valley walls, but he could feel the ground shaking even through the rumble of the Spartan's engines and the grinding of its tracks.

Where the warp rift had imploded, it left a smooth-sided semi-ovoid, a perfectly formed crater ten metres deep.

The vehicles of the Dreadwing accelerated into the dip, the legionaries keeping pace with war-plate-boosted strides. The grand cannons of the fortress could not adjust their aim quickly enough to follow the advance, so that the black line seemed to leave a wake of fire and explosions.

Within fifteen seconds they were inside the range of the main batteries and the tumult ended. It was replaced by the flare of lascannon beams and the crack of autocannons. Heavy bolters snarled rapid-fire rounds into the approaching Dark Angels.

The Dreadwing returned fire, their bolts passing through the energy shield, heavier weaponry still deflected and refracted from its insubstantial edge.

'Heartpierce!' Redloss snarled across the comm-feed.

Overhead a throatier roar joined the whine of interceptor jets. Blunt-nosed and slab-sided, four Caestus assault rams sped towards the fortress, leaving trails of plasma exhaust. The blue gleam of powerfields surrounded their snub prows. Anti-aircraft guns sprang into life, filling the air with detonations, multi-laser fire ricocheting from the reinforced hulls of the manned projectiles.

Boosters flared like suns, turning the aerial rams into dark blurs that snapped through the defence field, their havoc missile systems spewing rockets along the casements in the second before they hit the walls of the stronghold. Light burned whiter than the snow as magna-meltas developed to crack open the hulls of starships burst into life. The armoured prows slammed through the vaporised remains of the walls, depositing the legionaries aboard directly into the fortress.

Redloss clambered down into the troop compartment as they drew within a hundred metres of the main fortress, the Spartan's tracks cutting ridges along the smooth slope of the void-crater. Brace harnesses and inertia rams whined out of view as his companions stood at his back. He waited at the assault ramp's edge, one fist hovering over the bright red activator, axe in the other.

Missiles from Whirlwinds screamed over the Spartan to smash into the gates of the outer wall. Their warheads shattered into rad-infused shrapnel, contaminating the entire gatehouse with deadly splinters. Quad lascannons fired as the armoured carrier skidded across icy mud. Four beams sliced through the buckled remains of the gate. The armoured nose of the transport smashed through the remnants, sending twisted metal flying in all directions.

Redloss smacked his fist against the ramp release. Hydraulics spasmed, sending the assault ramp crashing down, crushing three red-clad defenders beneath its bulk. At the head of his brothers, Redloss led the assault.

The first waves of enemy were unaugmented Legion servants dressed in a mixture of padded flak armour and sturdier ceramite-laced scale or plated carapace. Some had bolters, most carried autoguns that chattered madly as they fired.

Redloss held back for a moment, allowing the Terminators to take the lead, Danaes at the front. The voted successor's power fist incorporated an auxiliary grenade launcher that hurled a volley of promethium charges into the midst of the enemy. Blossoms of fire engulfed a score of foes, turning flesh and clothing to ash that carried away in the wind of frag grenade detonations.

The combi-bolters of the Terminators cut a bloody gash through the defenders, allowing the Dreadwing to push on, a hundred warriors through the breach in the opening minute of the attack. Phosphex churned from incinerator cannons, turning squads to ashes, the baleful flames seeming to climb through the fortress' ports and murder holes.

On the ramparts above, squads deposited by the Caestus assault rams worked their way along the battlement, slaughtering gunnery crews, their advance heralded by the crack of bolt-rounds and the bass judder of autocannons and heavy bolters. Rad-bombs scorched the defences, flaying skin from flesh, flesh from bone, the lucky ones despatched by snarling chain weapons, others simply left to die in screeching agony.

Redloss moved left, waving his men forward with his axe. The enemy fell back from the courtyard immediately behind the gate, seeking shelter in the bastions that held up the next line of wall. Las-bolts and bullets screamed down from gun slits in the towers, sparking indigo flares from the energy field contained within Redloss' artificer-wrought armour.

Now that they were inside the citadel powerfields, the Dreadwing's augurs crackled and pinged into life, flooded with enemy signals. Most were unaugmented serfs, but there were at least two score of thermal plumes that had to be powered war-plate of some kind.

'Be free with your lethal attention, my brothers,' Redloss called to his warriors. He rejoiced at seeing the Dreadwing in full force, for only rarely did a commander dare call upon them to act en masse. Constantine had told him of short-lived voted lieutenants that had never seen the marvel of the Dreadwing in action. In that regard the rebellion of Horus was a blessing. Not since the first years of the Great Crusade had the weapons of his brothers been in such demand.

Vindicator siege tanks growled through the open gates and the broken sections of wall. Their massive thunderer cannons belched void-tipped shells that drew on the same ancient Terran technology as the annihilator cannon of the *Intolerant*. Swirling vortexes erupted along the next rampart, tearing chunks in the ferrocrete, purple-and-white implosions sucking warriors into the never-realm of the warp.

Behind the Vindicators came Predator tanks, their turrets and sponsons pouring out the wrath of the Dreadwing through autocannons and lascannons, heavy bolters and plasma cannons. Spartans and Land Raiders added to the storm of fire, the glow of laser and muzzle flare lighting the grey walls with red and blue and green.

In the wake of the armoured attack, more Dreadwing infantry reached the stronghold. They split, some ascending the outer wall to pour fire over the heads of their brothers while the bulk of the brotherhood pushed on towards the next fortifications.

The demise of the fortress was inevitable now that the outer wall had been pierced, but Redloss had another concern.

'Don't let any of the traitor filth escape!' he roared over the vox. 'Push hard, push swift.'

'Detecting massive energy surges from the eastern quadrant, on a sublevel, honoured Dreadbringer,' one of the augur-carriers reported. 'It must be the shield generators.'

'Griffon rampant,' Redloss voxed to his warriors, using the coded war-tongue of the Order. 'The drake's breath by twilight. Blood-ridden on the sinister veil. Inverse chimera.'

Every phrase was a shorthand for a formation and objective – each Dreadwing brother knew precisely his place and role in each. More a means to communicate principles and ethos than a specific engagement plan, the battle-cant allowed Redloss to convey complex information to a variable number of warriors.

Those that operated under the guise of the Griffon, in this case mostly the Terminator squads and their accompanying Spartans, Mastodons and Land Raiders, took to the fore again, advancing against the second line of defence. Behind the shield of this attack destroyer squads with melta-weapons, rad-missiles and heavy flamers converged on the left flank. Warriors with jump packs ascended to the ramparts of the towers, dual bolt pistols spitting death, the sergeants' phosphex grenades turning the upper storeys into fire-wreathed crematoriums.

Other Dreadwing squads assembled behind the destroyers, the many heads of the chimeras gathering in one place to attack. Devastator teams unleashed salvoes of missiles while mole mortars fired subterranean rounds into the sublevels where the shield generators were located.

Redloss monitored the advance from the second wave, his role to steer the wrath of his brothers, the guiding hand that would ensure the rage of the Dreadwing fell upon the correct point.

The enemy counter-attacked, armoured gates to the far left wheezing open to reveal two Dreadnoughts – war machines twice the size of a Space Marine, piloted by venerable warriors too badly wounded to fight on without their massive armoured forms. With them came a score of World Eaters screaming battle cries, their blue-and-white battleplate stained red with Zephathian blood. A tide of unaugmented humans followed, shrieking and yelling in the wake of their superhuman masters.

By themselves they posed little threat, but the traitors headed towards the flank of the Dreadwing force pushing hard to breach the towers closest to the generators. Gunners on the ramparts above were getting their aim in, and any delay would increase the casualties significantly.

'Dreadbringer's ire! Redden your blades!'

With this command, Redloss broke into a run, heading towards the emerging traitors, the head of his axe leaving ruddy trails as he accelerated to a full sprint. His nearest close-combat troops followed as though drawn along by invisible tethers.

A scathing volley of fire preceded Redloss' counter-charge by a few seconds, fire directed down from the outer wall sheared into the armoured tip of the World Eaters' thrust. A handful fell, torn apart by lascannon blasts and anti-tank missiles, the others pressed on towards their foes without hesitation.

One of the Dreadnoughts, the plates of its armour painted in the livery of Angron's XII, swung towards Redloss. Its right hand was a chainclaw, two metre-long tines edged with whirling teeth. Its left mount sported a quadruple autocannon that burst into life with a staccato snarl. The fusillade hit a Dark Angel a few metres to the left of the Dreadbringer, smashing him from his feet as black plate exploded into splinters. The Dreadnought raked its fire towards Redloss and he dived into it, taking two impacts against his plastron as he rolled through the flicker of tracer rounds. Another Dreadwing warrior was caught high, pauldrons cracking, helm turned to a buckled, broken mess by the storm of fist-sized shells that hurled his corpse into his brothers following behind.

Redloss regained his momentum in a second and powered onwards undeterred. He could smell the blood of his brother spattered on his armour, and as he closed with the World Eaters the stench of old viscera assailed him through the olfactory intake.

The stark image of the bone towers drove Redloss on. It was not the slaughter itself that riled him. He had been brought into the Dreadwing for his expertise in killing, and had ascended to the position of voted lieutenant upon a pile of indiscriminately slain corpses. It was a source of pride that he could number his dead foes in the tens of thousands. But he did not boast. Needless glorification, the hubris of exhibition offended his sensibilities.

He had seen much of the Word Bearers and the legacy of the offensive they had called their 'Shadow Crusade' – he had been present at the interrogation of several prisoners. It was their assertion that the energy of the warp could be shaped by sacrifice and ritual, much as a psyker could, when properly trained, siphon warp energy into psychic powers within the material realm.

Mostly nonsense, it seemed, but a twisted logic that underpinned their brutality.

He pounded across the shell-pocked courtyard while more Dark Angels bounded past, their jump packs carrying them in long leaps towards the foe.

The World Eaters were a different case. They made sport of their slaying. Redloss could admit that he liked to bring death. The power of ending another life was intoxicating at times. But it was the outcome that drew him, not the act. It mattered not at all whether he slew a foe with a bolter or a battle cruiser, the transition from living to dead was the same. The World Eaters he had faced during the purge of the Five Hundred Worlds were deluded, gaining pleasure from the fighting itself. The XII's cerebral implants made them superior warriors but had turned them into raging caricatures of themselves, on occasion sacrificing victory for the sake of prolonging combat.

The towers were wasteful, exuberant declarations of power. An abuse of the devastating potential that had been gifted to them by the Emperor. It was as alien

to Redloss as the thought that his axe might enjoy cutting. That strangeness fuelled his hatred and made him want to destroy the perpetrators.

The assault squad drove like a sword point into the oncoming defenders, bolt pistols barking, chainswords snarling. A last-moment storm of las-fire, bullets and bolts greeted them and then the two forces swirled together in wild melee.

The Dreadnought crashed into the anarchy, its claws slashing and gouging, hacking through serfs and Dark Angels. It pivoted at the waist, beheading three of its own to smash spinning adamantium teeth through a descending assault legionary. Another Dark Angel was torn in two by the next swing, the powerplant of his backpack exploding into a miniature lightning storm as the gut-slicked claw cleaved him in half.

The Dreadnought pilot spied Redloss and opened fire with the autocannons. The Dreadwing commander plunged through the hail, trusting to the protection of his war-plate's field. An actinic aura of discharging energy engulfed him, and a second later he burst from the storm trailing purple streamers of energy, axe raised for the strike.

His first double-handed blow hewed into the side of the main sarcophagus. The axe's powerfield exploded into life, ceramite splintered and the ferrite layer beneath vaporised. The Dreadnought turned, lashing wildly with its claw. Redloss moved with the war machine, using its bulk against it, keeping out of reach.

His axe swung up, severing hydraulics and bursting pneumatics in the hip. The Dreadnought listed to the right like a holed boat, making one last desperate lunge with its chainclaw. It caught a glancing blow across Redloss' backpack. A cloud of ice particles from a ruptured coolant stream sprayed behind him.

Ignoring the mass of the engine block, Redloss circled around once more. The Dreadnought spun its armoured torso on immobilised legs, trying to catch him. The voted lieutenant suddenly changed direction. He ducked beneath the slicing claw and slammed the power axe into the rotating sarcophagus, using his strength and the momentum of the Dreadnought's spin to break open the pilot's housing.

The blade bit deep. Blood and artificial amniotic fluid fountained from the armoured womb-case. The pilot's twitching death throes threw the Dreadnought backwards, claw carving furrows in the ground as it fell.

Redloss did not give the downed war machine a second glance. Two World Eaters legionaries turned towards him, bolts from their pistols becoming smoke trails in the blaze of his energy shield. The Dreadwing commander launched into another charge, wasting no time.

'Unlike you bloodthirsty savages,' he snarled through his battleplate's vocalisers, 'I'll make this quick!'

FIVE

Darkness falls

Ultramar

The capital, Numentis, had been turned to rubble first, every man, woman, child and beast slaughtered in the earliest hours of the traitor attack. Nothing remained to call it a settlement, much less a capital, but it was in Numentis that the Lion raised his banner.

Survivors came, in small groups, responding to transmissions and patrols sent out by the Dark Angels. Not many, a few hundred, a thousand at most by the end of the first planetary rotation.

They had every right to be numb, shocked beyond comprehension by the atrocity committed against them. But here they were, grandparents shepherding grandchildren, infants helping elders, families and friends, neighbours who might have once feuded, all brought together in what should have been abject misery, but instead they came and they applauded the Dark Angels and called out the praises of the Lion.

More than the towers, more than the corpse-fields they had found beyond the cities, and the thousands of frozen bodies in the void of orbit from destroyed system defence stations, this nearly broke Holguin's resolve. The simple gratitude that came from being alive when so many were not.

There was something remarkable about the indomitability of human spirit that had always made Holguin smile, but no more. Zephath had been burned, its defences destroyed and its major cities levelled. It was impossible to calculate the number of people that had been slain, nor the number that had given up their bodies to the grotesque towers of the Word Bearers.

Indomitability was an inbred cousin of denial, it seemed.

He had witnessed many things he knew objectively to be horrific, and been unmoved. He had slain foes on non-compliant worlds, knowing that as individuals they perhaps had no choice but to follow the rule of their defiant masters and mistresses. It was the price of compliance, the toll demanded by the Imperium to safeguard the future of all humanity.

Even during the Thramas Crusade, when the Night Lords had used populations to bait their vicious traps and Curze had razed planets to cow resistance on others,

Holguin had been sustained by a sense of purpose. The rebellion, the nature of what Horus had unleashed, had not really settled in his brain.

And now the scarred, terrified people of Zephath thanked him for killing those that had almost wiped them from the face of their world. Their gratitude should have been a reward, but the relief in their voices was not matched in their eyes. Fear dominated all. And from some came the unspoken accusation: you brought this upon us.

Not Holguin. Not the Dark Angels. The Legiones Astartes. The gods of war that now used the worlds of mortals as their battleground.

And for what? For the Emperor?

Not here, not in Imperium Secundus. This was the realm of Sanguinius, the design of Roboute Guilliman. The Emperor was not here.

Holguin kept his thoughts to himself. He did no one justice to speak of his doubts. He was the leader of the Deathwing, the lauded veterans of the Legion and his loyalty, his bond to the primarch, was to be without blemish. For this reason he kept secret his fear that Imperium Secundus was worse than a mistake, it was a lie. For this reason he accepted the tearful thanks of the battered survivors with silent nods. For this reason he spoke in opposition to his liege only in private, and even then held back his greatest criticisms.

He was a soldier, and it was his duty to obey. This was the rock to which he clung while the tide of anarchy rose around him.

When the Lion called for the people of Zephath to put forward a council of leaders, Holguin brought their nominees to the camp of the primarch. Of the six, four were men of older years, the other two women of equally advanced age.

‘I see that you trust in the wisdom of your elders,’ he said to them as they disembarked from the Rhino.

‘Not really,’ replied one rheumy-eyed ancient. ‘All the younger folk tried to fight. Babes and grave-dodgers, we’re all that’s left.’

They looked in wonder and shock at their surroundings. Amongst the rubble of the city the Dark Angels had worked swiftly, combining prefabricated defences with fresh buildings erected from the ruins of the old. Foam-sprayed plascrete roads paved several square kilometres of central Numentis. Between them armoured transports acted as barracks and comms stations, while pod-dropped defence posts guarded the perimeter and landing pads brought in by Thunderhawk transporters hosted gunships coming and going on patrol sweeps.

The charnel towers had been toppled as a priority. Beyond their macabre image, they were surrounded by a tangible aura of despair that affected even the warriors of the First Legion. Mutterings about strange forces, haunted dreams and inexplicable occurrences were ruthlessly quashed by the Brother-Redemptors, but Holguin had heard the reports of the Librarians that the towers were psychically

tainted – corrupted warp-beacons powered by terror, erected to call to something beyond the veil that separated realities. They had been nervous to say more, but in the last few years there was not a man in the Legion that had not come across those otherworldly forces, or some evidence of the bizarre existence that lay in the warp.

The remains contained in the towers had been given no more dignity than mass graves dug by tanks suited to building siege lines. Yet that was more than they had had before.

The charnel pits were guarded and quarantined, despite the protests from some of the Zephathians that they be allowed to mark remembrance for the fallen. The chance of disease spreading was too high for such sentiment, the chance of other contamination another risk to be avoided.

In their place, outposts consisting of drop-launched castellum strongholds had been seeded across the ruins, as much to act as buffers to the incoming refugees as a defence against aggression. From these prefabricated fortifications squads of Dark Angels enforced a two-kilometre exclusion cordon around the central encampment, ensuring a civilian-free firezone for those within the inner defences. Food and medical aid were passed out through these outposts, their distribution protected by legionaries to ensure that the unseemly scrambles did not degenerate into violence.

Order, the Lion had emphasised, had to be maintained at all costs.

All of this activity required no further input from the primarch, it was simply second nature to the Space Marines to create the border fortress according to doctrines laid down first by the Emperor and refined by their lord. The Lion busied himself with other matters, keeping his own counsel except to receive hourly reports from his senior officers.

Holguin ushered the tired Zephathian delegates through the clatter and smog of the ongoing fortification works. Even in this makeshift camp there was evidence of the pomp and grandeur of the Legion. Company, Chapter and Order banners of black, green, red and white flapped in the strong wind that blew across Numentis, now that there was no obstacle taller than a storey to block its progress. Pennants flapped on the vehicles, awnings and pavilions, reminiscent of the training fields of Caliban, and above bunkers that protected supply depots and augur stations.

The Lion’s headquarters were as grand as any palace, though far smaller. A Stormbird especially fitted with the most powerful strategic data systems and communications network formed the core. Black with the sigil of the Legion in gold across its wings and fuselage, it stood glowering on clawed landing feet, linked by armoured walkways to other vehicles acting as bunkers and strongpoints.

Two Glaive super-heavies flanked the entrance to the outer camp, in turn protected by a ring of Whirlwind mobile missile launchers in various patterns. Unlike the Mars-manufactured volkite weapons found in other Legions, the Glaives of the Dreadwing sported warp cannons designed by the Emperor's greatest armourers, capable of creating dimensional rifts that tore apart their targets from within much like the annihilator cannon Redloss had unleashed at the traitor fortress.

Further to each side, point-defence emplacements with tarantula and rapier weapons systems were guarded by the towering forms of Dreadnoughts. Anti-aircraft batteries scoured the skies with inhuman eyes, though nothing flew there except by the command of the Lion. Even so, Primaris-Lightning fighters circled a kilometre above the camp, ready to intercept any threat.

Passing between the Glaives, several white-painted buildings came into view. Staffed by members of the apothecarion, the medicae facilities treated the Dark Angels casualties with light enough injuries not to require shipping to orbit. Not by coincidence were the portable forgeworks of the Techmarines erected on a neighbouring plot. The immediate need for bionic limbs and artificial organs necessitated close cooperation between the two specialist formations. He could smell blood on the wind, but doubted his unenhanced companions could make the distinction. Far more potent was the mixture of lubricants and fuel emanating from the armoury. The clatter of rivet guns and the hissing sparks of laswelders joined a background grumble of engines idling as generators.

The Zephathians did not know where to look, their gazes roaming everywhere, fluctuating between amazement and fear in near-equal measure. They flinched in unison as a pair of attack speeders screamed past, flying just a few metres above the camp.

Holguin could not imagine what they really made of the sights, smells and sounds. He was so used to such conditions that he did not give them a second thought.

A detachment fifty-strong of veterans in Terminator armour stood as honour guard to the Lion's Stormbird transport. They came from Chapters across the force, their heraldry a mix of designs, but above them was raised the flag of the Deathwing, a red Legion symbol on black.

They parted as Holguin and his charges approached, the whine of their armour and heavy tread of feet like a greeting to the voted lieutenant's ears. As he walked to the assault ramp of the Stormbird the Deathwing each pivoted in turn, raising their combi-bolters, autocannons and flamers in salute.

'You are their commander?' asked one of the women as she was helped onto the foot of the ramp by a man probably even older.

‘Sometimes,’ Holguin replied. Her scowl eloquently explained that this was an insufficient answer. She reminded the Deathwing commander of his father’s sister, a formidable woman despite physical frailty for much of her life. He shrugged, as close as his war-plate would allow. ‘It is complicated, and I do not wish to keep the Lion waiting.’

She took this explanation with a sour look but said nothing more.

Within the Stormbird the benches and bulkheads that usually filled the main compartment had been cleared to create an open space. Mesh-clad lamps in the ceiling suffused the interior with a stark blue light, almost sterile in its brightness. It was far from the muted gloom of the audience chamber aboard the *Honoured Deeds*. This was a place of action, not contemplation – clinical and efficient.

Holguin much preferred it. His liege lord had a tendency, when left alone for too long, to dwell on matters in a manner that was not constructive. Holguin would never say that the Lion brooded. Not out loud, at least.

In this place, screens displayed strategic dispositions, servitors ready to dispense orders and decrypt incoming ciphers manned the communications stations and half a dozen hololithic projectors related constantly streamed data feeds from orbit and the plethora of patrols and overflights enmeshing much of Zephath in the Legion’s surveyor web.

There was no striving for an inner truth, only the ebb and flow of raw data to be sifted and acted upon. The starkness, the binary nature of it, seemed to reassure the Lion in a way that the company of his Space Marines could not.

He sat on a chair of plasteel, as large as his throne but less grandiose in design. Secondary monitors, interfaces, keypads and pict-feed lenses surrounded the command chair, bathing the primarch’s armour and face with a rainbow of lights that shifted swiftly across the spectrum.

He looked up as Holguin stepped across the threshold of the Stormbird, the delegates now clustered behind him like a litter of feeble young. The primarch looked at each of them in turn. They all flinched from that gaze, three of them dropping to a knee in deference. Only the woman that had attempted to interrogate Holguin was able to hold the Lion’s gaze for more than a moment, and even then her eyes flicked between the primarch and the floor.

‘You are now the ruling council of Zephath,’ said the primarch. ‘Congratulations would be misplaced. You have taken up a great responsibility. It will be your task to rebuild your world and make it fit for the Imperium.’

‘With your aid, we can do anything,’ said the old woman.

‘What is your name, elder?’ The Lion stood up, monitors and controls pads moving themselves out of his way as he stepped down from the interface throne.

‘Arisata, my lord. Arisata Drak Vergoef.’

‘You seem a capable woman, Arisata Drak Vergoef, but you have made an error. There will be no aid from me or my Legion.’

‘But this encampment…?’

‘A military necessity. No, not a necessity. A reflex. An instinct.’ The Lion sighed and paced forwards, forcing the delegates to part. ‘Some of the buildings we will leave for you. We can spare a few of our apothecarion auxilia. Everything else you will have to look to Lord Guilliman to provide.’

‘You cannot abandon us, my lord.’ Arisata stated it as a fact, not a plea. ‘We need you.’

‘Others need me more,’ the primarch replied. ‘I am the Lord Protector. You have been delivered from the invaders and there are other wars I must prosecute. Look to Macragge for aid.’

The Lion stood to one side at the top of the ramp, arms crossed, making clear his intention for them to leave. The members of the delegation were immobile, stunned. They stared open-mouthed at the primarch’s declaration, horrified by what they perceived as callousness though Holguin knew it well as simple Calibanite pragmatism. There was no special cause here, nothing that marked this world as more worthy of succour than any of the others ravaged by Lorgar and Angron’s demented crusade.

One of the delegates took a step forward, tears in his eyes. ‘But…’

‘Time to leave,’ said Holguin, ushering them all to the ramp. A couple looked as though they might protest further but the grim face of the primarch stalled their words. Only Arisata looked at the Lion as they passed and even she said nothing.

No sooner had they started down the ramp than the Lion was moving back to the interface chair, his mind already returning to strategic matters – if it had ever truly left them.

‘You will need to create a security force,’ Holguin told the Zephathians as he led them back through the camp. ‘Resources will be scarce, there will be fighting if you do not act swiftly. I will see that we leave some armaments for your militia.’

‘You would make us warlords,’ said one of the male elders. ‘Ruling by the gun?’

‘If you do not, one that is willing to do so will take your place,’ Holguin snapped back. ‘Your world is in dire need, your lofty virtues of representation and equality must be checked. You have the authority of the Triumvirate now. Use it. Fear of reprisal from Macragge will gain you some space. Lord Guilliman will despatch a relief ship or two. Do the best you can until they arrive.’

Though softly spoken, Arisata’s words dripped bitterness. ‘That’s it?’

‘We did not bring the World Eaters and Word Bearers to Zephath,’ Holguin reminded her.

‘Of course.’ She dropped her gaze. ‘But we did not bring this punishment on ourselves, either.’

They were nearly at the gate, the gigantic hulls of the super-heavies visible from where they were.

‘Blame Horus.’ Holguin quickly stepped ahead and turned, stopping them with a raised hand. ‘Look at me! Remember who it was that turned his hand against the Emperor – Horus. This war is his doing, no other. He sent the Word Bearers and the World Eaters to the Five Hundred Worlds – not the Lion, not Guilliman or Sanguinius. If you want to hate, then do so, but reserve your hatred for *Horus*.’

‘I will contact you,’ he muttered before he stalked away, somewhat ashamed at his outburst.

Though a giant by human proportion, Farith Redloss had to almost run to keep up with the long strides of his primarch. The Lion seemed agitated, more than usual, and his excessive pace was a symptom of his mood.

They followed a secondary conduit passage of the *Honoured Deeds*, having taken a conveyor down from the lower levels of the strategium decks. The Lion had to bend his neck in the confines of the corridor but it made little impact on his speed.

Holguin was there too, along with Stenius. They trailed behind Redloss, the rapid wheeze of the captain’s artificial breathing regulator making it appear that he would expire at any moment.

Redloss knew where they were going and the prospect chilled his thoughts. He had not been part of the expedition to Perditus, had played no part in the discovery of the device they simply referred to as ‘the artefact’.

Even so, he had talked to Corswain before departing for Macragge and knew something of the circumstances of its acquisition.

A chamber door slid open at a gesture from the Lion, parting to reveal a ruddily lit bay that had once been a magazine for the main bombardment cannon. The reinforced walls and single means of ingress and egress – the loading elevators had been closed up – made it the ideal place to stow the artefact.

The magazine had a high ceiling, nearly eighty metres up, supported by thick columns and reinforced vaults. Most of the space was taken up with vertiginous banks of Mechanicum machinery, stacked up on newly raised walkways and levels, filling the space with banks of dials and levers and flashing lights and coils of cabling and pipelines.

Gantries, steps and ladders were arranged around it. It was a perfect sphere of marbled black and dark grey, with flecks of gold that moved slowly across its surface.

Redloss knew that the thing could sense them. It was like hearing the distant scratching at a door, almost inaudible but gnawing and insistent. He hated coming

here, but the Lion had insisted that his senior officers were acquainted with the warp device that identified itself as Tuchulcha.

Connected to Tuchulcha by several spinal implants, a servitor emerged from the shadows. It was a boy, probably no more than ten Terran years of age, but with the wrinkled, parchment-like skin of an elder. His eyes were yellow and glazed, his hair missing in clumps, scabs around the corners of his mouth. The smell of urine and faeces was almost as unpleasant as the otherworldly presence of the device itself.

It was a bargain of practicality, Redloss reminded himself as the servitor-puppet tottered over to stand before the Lion. Without Tuchulcha the Dark Angels fleet would never have been able to pierce the ruinstorm and reach Macragge. It was obvious, and the Lion had warned as much, that the warp entity was serving its own alien needs, but the immediate need outweighed that longer-term risk.

Redloss wasn't convinced by this reasoning and might even have spoken against the plan had he been at Perditus.

As it was, the deal was done and Tuchulcha had been moved from the *Invincible Reason* to the *Honoured Deeds*. There would be consequences – that much was tacitly agreed, but their nature was yet to be revealed.

'Hello, Lion.' The boy's voice was a whisper, almost unheard over the hum of power lines and the clicking and clattering of engines. 'I am sorry that you are unhappy.'

'Stop that,' snarled the primarch.

'Are you not sad? I have been trying to learn expressions. Your face looks unhappy.'

'I need you to find someone for me, Tuchulcha,' the Lion said, changing his tone, feigning friendliness. As a device capable of flattening warp space and translating entire fleets in an instant, Tuchulcha could be fatally temperamental. So far it had not demonstrated the destructive potential of its abilities but the Lion had insisted that nobody antagonised the artefact.

'Find someone, Lion?' The boy-puppet cocked his head to one side. 'Have you lost someone?'

'Before the fleet arrived, there were ships in this star system,' the Lion continued, measuring each word patiently. 'They fled when we came here. The Navigators could see the wake of their warp jumps. Can you follow where they went?'

'Perhaps.' The servitor closed its eyes, face going slack as Tuchulcha withdrew some of its attention. As though waking, the puppet stirred into life a few seconds later. 'I can see them.'

'Can you take us after them?' asked the Lion.

'I can.' Tuchulcha's puppet shrugged and pouted. 'I do not think I should.'

‘Why not?’ The Lion remained calm, his agitation kept in check by monumental willpower. Redloss wondered if his primarch was always in such a state – holding back a tide of frustration at the mortal limits of his gene-sons. Dealing with Tuchulcha required another level of self-restraint.

‘You will know, in a moment,’ the servitor replied with a weak smile.

‘What does that mean?’ asked Holguin.

The Lion turned away, brow knotted in thought.

The vox-bead in Redloss’ ear chimed with an incoming message. The others were instantly alert too, receiving the same transmission.

‘*I have an urgent command channel request from Lady Fiana,*’ announced one of the comm-adepts in the strategium. ‘*You requested command channel restrictions, my liege, but she is very insistent.*’

‘I grant audience,’ the Lion growled in reply.

Lady Theralyn Fiana of House Ne’iocene had temporarily adopted the role of Chief Navigator on the *Honoured Deeds*, leaving the *Invincible Reason* behind at Macragge. As she was matriarch to many of the Navigators of the fleet, none had opposed the move, which was fortunate, since the fewer people that knew about Tuchulcha, the better.

Her voice was refined, her accent unmistakably that of a prosperous Terran despite spending most of her life abroad in the warp. She was also extremely upset.

‘*The beacon, it’s gone!*’ she told them over the vox. ‘*I can’t find Sotha!*’

‘Calm down,’ said Redloss. ‘What is happening?’

He heard Fiana taking in a deep breath before continuing. ‘*The Pharos beacon on Sotha that we have been using instead of the Astronomican. It’s gone out.*’

‘Gone out?’ The Lion narrowed his eyes as he turned his head towards Tuchulcha. ‘You mean the signal has been blocked locally?’

‘*No, my liege, not at all. It has ended at the source. Something has happened at Sotha.*’ Fiana sounded afraid, and it made Redloss uneasy to consider what might frighten a woman who had been raised looking into the madness of the warp. ‘*The warp has gone dark. I cannot find our way back.*’

‘What is the meaning of this?’ the Lion demanded of Tuchulcha’s puppet-servitor. ‘What have you done?’

‘Not I, Lion.’ The puppet cringed in genuine dread and black smears marred the surface of the artefact. ‘The moon of the warp has set. Midnight-clad are the Five Hundred Worlds.’

‘Midnight-clad?’ snarled Redloss, remembering Stenius mentioning the phrase before.

The Lion growled, a feral noise that startled the Dreadwing voted lieutenant. The primarch’s look was equally savage, as though he wanted to punch a hole

through something.

‘What a fool I am,’ he snarled. He clenched his fists, overwhelmed by emotion. ‘Here we are, at the far end of the Five Hundred Worlds, hundreds of light years from Sotha. How could I have been so gullible, so ready to play the part of the ravaging hound chasing the trail that the Night Haunter left for us?’

‘You think this is Curze, my liege?’ said Redloss. ‘He deliberately drew us away?’

‘We have to get to Sotha,’ said Stenius. ‘Something has gone terribly wrong.’

‘Macragge.’ The Lion started to reach a hand towards the puppet but restrained himself. ‘Tuchulcha, you must pave a road for us, to Macragge.’

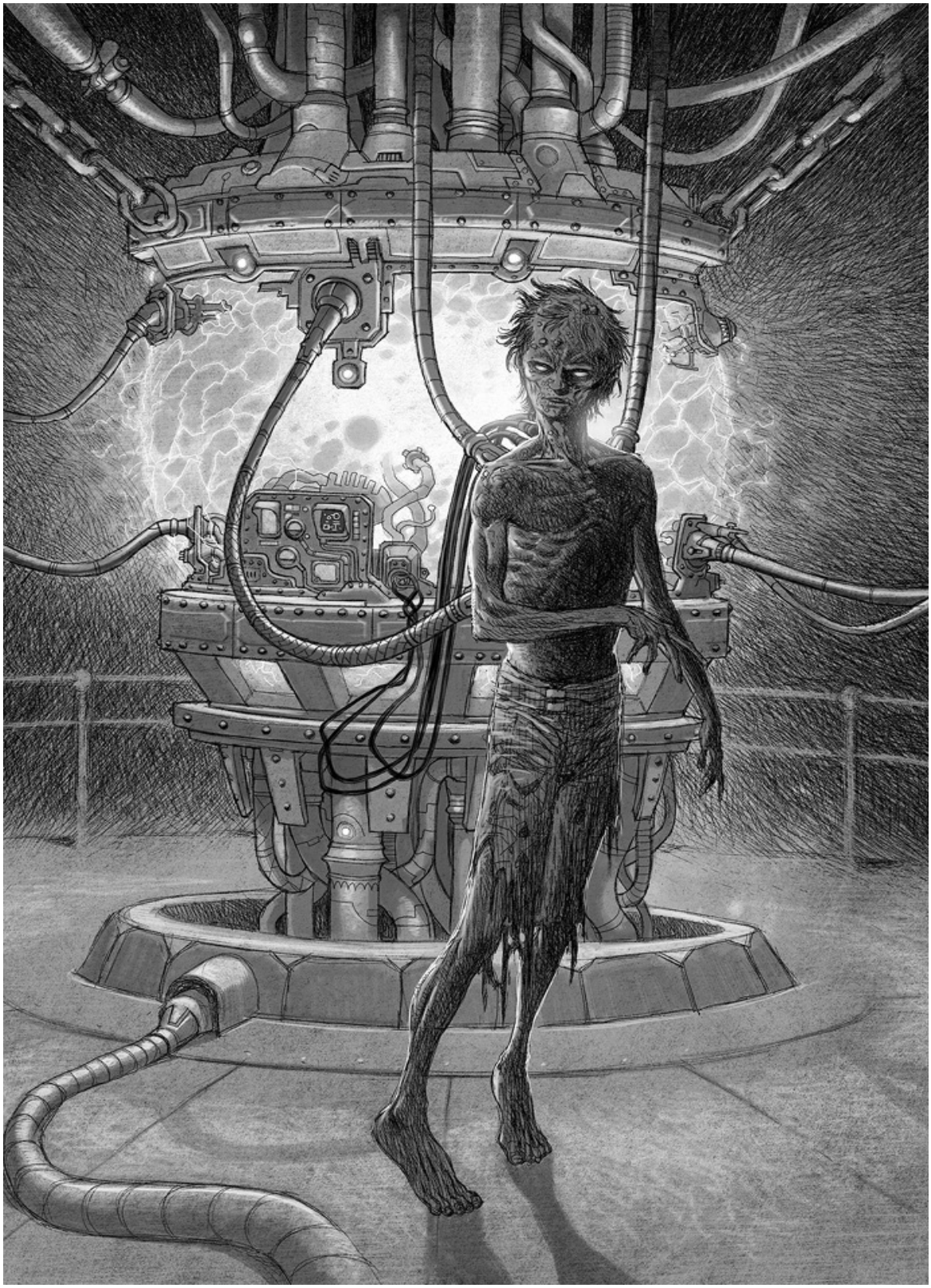
‘Pardon, my lord, but why not Sotha?’ Stenius asked.

‘Because I will not be fooled twice. If Curze has destroyed the beacon at Sotha it is because he wants all eyes turned there. And that means his intent is elsewhere. Macragge. What he wants has always been on Macragge.’

He gave vent to his pent-up frustration at last, slamming a fist into the wall. He withdrew his hand, a deep dent left in the bulkhead.

‘Not this time, Konrad. This time I will catch you.’

Tuchulcha’s servitor bowed, gawky and unbalanced. ‘As you wish, Lion. We go to Macragge.’



Tuchulcha's warp-tainted avatar speaks

TWAIN

SIX

No news is ill news

Caliban

It had once been merely a castle.

Less than that. In an age forgotten by even the oldest legends of the most ancient chronicles it had merely been a house. A cave, more to the point, sitting close to the summit of a mountain weathered by the storms and winds of a timeless age. This crag sat alone, as though exiled by its gigantic neighbours several hundred kilometres to the north, to sit out its existence in the forested hills.

Of its nature before then, in the darkest depths of Old Night and in the Time Before, everything was lost.

But at this place, in that cave near the peak, a warrior had found sanctuary from the enraged monsters that stalked the forests below. Beasts that had once been held at bay by arcane technologies, freed to roam again with the fall of Mankind's great empire.

Overlooking an ancient road, that cave proved a superb vantage point from which to sally forth to protect the survivors fleeing from the depths of the forest. The warrior, clad in the last armour of his division and bearing the last weapons, laid claim to the land that he could ride out to patrol and offered protection to all that came under his auspices.

The cave was big, but not big enough for homes and foundries and schools, and so the people delved deeper into the rock and built up walls around it, to make a tower, and a keep and then, yes, a castle.

The warrior, his name no longer remembered, trained others and forged wargear for them, so that the patrols could range further and the watch strengthened. As their numbers grew, their tale spread and there came to this place people brought by the rumour of salvation and hope.

From anarchy they fled. From the barbarism of petty warlords and the predation of the Great Beasts. Here was solidity, and surety, and potential. Here was hierarchy and calm. From this, the warriors named themselves.

The Order.

And it seemed that this place would outlast them all, a foundation of stone unbreakable by the vicissitudes of war and time. They were strong, but their

strength came from their fortress, where their numbers swelled, the wounded healed and the lessons of hard-won battles could be laid down for future generations to learn.

Enduring, endless, unmoving. That was the nature of the place and so that was the name they gave it in their ancient tongue.

Aldurukh.

It had changed much over the millennia, except in name and character. It was a city now. A metropolis-stronghold of a million souls, part of the mountain itself and extended into the plains at its feet – lowlands that had once been highlands, levelled by the tetradozers of Terra's planetary reclamation corps to make way for highways and landing strips and megafarms. Of the forests, only specially preserved remnants dotted the landscape, a few thousand hectares of what were once millions of square kilometres of native greenwood. The distant horizon was broken by the rearing forms of arcologies that delved into the ground even further than they stretched into the air, each surrounded by its own satellites of mineworkings, ore processing plants, smoke-belching foundries, solar arrays, power generators and cereal refineries.

From his new haunt, the summit chamber of a watchtower on the outer wall of Aldurukh, Chapter Master Astelan could see all of this.

'What a dismal hole.'

His companion said nothing. Marchesa-Colonel Tylain wore the livery of the Imperial Army auxiliaries stationed on Caliban since the arrival of the Imperium, her hair cut short and hidden beneath a cap with an eagle-faced brim, just a few wisps of auburn and grey showing. She held herself straight, back rigid and eyes set, but her slim build and short stature were even more obvious next to the gigantic frame of the Space Marine. Her cuffs bore the golden-threaded marks of high rank and the colours of medals and commendations adorned her chest.

'The Calibanites claim it was beautiful, of course,' Astelan continued. 'Emerald forests, sapphire rivers, pristine mountains. All of that. I'll have to take their word for it, the reclamation pioneers had already torn most of it down and built half a dozen arcologies before I ever set eyes on the planet.'

'What is Terra like, First Master?' asked Lady Tylain.

The title was only a bauble really, presented to him by Luther to mark out Astelan amongst the other Chapter Masters, but lacking any authority beyond the favour of the Grand Master. It was an old Calibanite rank, like seneschal and Lord Cypher and Grand Master, resurrected by Luther. Astelan had known many titles over his long years, but took particular pleasure in this one. Not in itself, but in the mark of trust and respect it represented. Trust and respect he had worked hard to earn from the head of the Order.

Also it reminded him of the time when his Legion had not been the Dark Angels, when the Emperor himself had commanded them simply as the First.

‘Like?’ Astelan turned his head to look at Tylain. He had broad features, the skin currently darkened by exposure and the activity of the melanchromatic system of his gene-seed. His hair, also dark, was longer than usual for the Dark Angels and hung to his shoulders in tightly wound braids held by simple grey beads. ‘Which part? When? Where I grew up, by the Dynepri River, it was much like old Caliban, I suppose. More snow, more ice a lot of the year. But coniferous forests, wide plains. Beautiful. But much like here, the rise of the Emperor brought civilisation and society back to the wilderness. Cities, strongholds, transport networks.’

He turned fully and crossed his arms, wrinkling his heavy robe, the voluminous sleeves sliding back to expose immense forearms criss-crossed with faint scars.

‘Most of the planets I’ve seen are disappointingly alike, Lady Tylain. Land, air, water. We wouldn’t be interested in them otherwise. You really haven’t missed much.’

If the Marchesa-colonel was disappointed by this response she hid it well. With a shrug, she handed Astelan the data-slate she had brought to the watch chamber.

‘Fourteen more cells have been completed, First Master,’ she told him, even as he read the same from the digitised report. ‘Seventy-three more are ready to be fitted with secure access and monitors but there have been delays from the forgeworks.’

‘How many in total?’ Astelan knew the answer. He wanted to know if Tylain knew it too.

‘One thousand and forty-eight multiple dorters, another seven hundred and fifty officer confinement cells.’ She had not hesitated or looked at the report. ‘Only space for three hundred and seven more needed. It would be easier if we did not separate out the ranking warriors.’

‘And that would make it easier for them to foment further rebellion, Marchesa-colonel. Time spent now will be rewarded with better security later. The disaffected have raised arms against Sar Luther once already. They shall not be given a second chance.’

‘Then why keep them at all?’

‘They were misguided, not treacherous.’ The lie came easily. In truth, Astelan knew that if he simply eliminated Luther’s rivals his own position would become far more tenuous. Better to have them if needed, a weapon in its sheath. ‘When the Lion returns he would not think kindly of us if we had slaughtered his warriors out of hand.’

‘Most of them are Terran, like you, First Master.’

‘You have a point to make?’

If Lady Tylain did, she kept it to herself as a buzz indicated another person was entering the watchtower. Moments later the chamber door slid open to reveal an ascender cage. Chapter Master Galedan, Astelan's direct subordinate and executive officer, stepped into the room.

The First Master waited for Galedan to say something, but the Chapter Master stood in silence. Galedan darted a look at Tylain.

'It appears the Chapter Master wishes to speak to me alone,' said Astelan. Galedan shot him an irritated look, which he ignored. 'Thank you for the report, Marchesa-colonel, I expect the delays at the foundries to be made up within the week. If not, Sar Luther will be informed, and I do not think he will take kindly to the news.'

'I shall pass that on to the overseers' guild, First Master,' said Tylain. She saluted Astelan and then Galedan, who watched her out of the chamber and did not speak until the clank of the conveyor rattled through the floor.

'Ships have been detected breaching warp at the edge of the system,' he said, before Astelan had a chance to say anything else. 'Zahariel's band of Librarians detected the warpwash against the storm this morning.'

'Zahariel is back?' This would be portentous news. Much effort had been spent trying to locate the head of the Librarius since his disappearance some days earlier. Astelan had seen him leave with Lord Cypher, but both the Guardian of the Order and Luther himself were being tight-lipped on the entire matter, and had ordered that knowledge of the Librarian's absence be carefully controlled.

'Not yet. His second, Vassago, broke the news.'

'You seem unduly excited about the return of supply ships.'

'A warship, First Master,' said Galedan. 'At least one. Definitely several ships, larger than any freighter. Sar Luther has ordered the system defences onto full alert. Monitor patrols have been launched to intercept the incoming flotilla.'

'Luther knows already? That was unwise, Galedan. You should come to me first with any information of prominence.'

'I didn't inform Sar Luther,' Galedan growled back. 'It came straight from Vassago. Were I not duty Marshal of the Watch I would not have found out at all.'

Astelan noted the annoyance of his companion and raised a conciliatory hand.

'I spoke out of turn. The blame is not yours. It irks me, is all, that Vassago and his pseudo-Librarius keep such close counsel. And Lord Cypher, there's another that seems to go out of his way to put obstacles in my path. If we are to have the ear of Luther, our voice must be clear and consistent. The management of intelligence is essential to that.'

'It will be ten days before they reach orbit. What difference would it make, knowing this a few hours earlier?'

‘A lot can happen in a few hours. The first orders to the defence commanders, for example. Who issues them, and what is their exact wording? Should we run them through extra gunnery drills to make sure they are good and ready to open fire at a moment’s notice? Could we time the announcement of the ships’ arrival to coincide with a duty roster of pliable officers in the key positions? If we take control of these things, we are the masters of perception. There are factions developing, Galedan, vying for a majority of power on Caliban.’

Astelan returned his gaze to the window, his eyes moving east, towards the high towers of Aldurukh’s central citadel, the Angelicasta.

‘When you remove the Emperor, who is left worthy of service? Would you wish to give your life for Luther and Caliban? Or shall we put our purpose to a higher cause, Chapter Master?’

‘I swore oaths to the Lion and the Emperor,’ Galedan said. He frowned. ‘I have always been proud to serve at your side, but I don’t understand what we are doing now. If we support Luther, we are supporting Caliban’s independence and betraying the Emperor. I’m not saying it was wrong, but why did you turn on Melian and the others that were going to unseat Sar Luther?’

‘Their insurrection was doomed to failure. Their stirrings and agitation would have engendered a paranoia in Luther. He would cloister himself with Lord Cypher and the other traditionalists. Those of us shunned once already by the Lion would be shunned again, or worse.’

‘Worse, First Master? What is worse than this meandering existence? Exiled and imprisoned at one and the same time.’

‘We have our lives, and so we can remain hopeful, Galedan. I have my reasons for contesting the will of the Lion, but Luther is the greatest victim of the primarch. His world lost, the Order that gave him meaning destroyed, the loyalty he showed to his liege-son rebuffed and humbled. Luther nurses a hatred deeper than any of us, even if he hides it well. Any that stand in his way will be crushed.’

Galedan considered these words for several seconds, obviously wrestling with the nature of divided loyalties.

‘The important thing to bear in mind, my friend,’ Astelan assured him, ‘is that we remain alive and close to Luther to contest or exploit whatever developments occur. We do not need a grand strategy, the tides of war are rising and only a fool predicts where everything will get washed. We wait, we watch and when the time comes to act, we will be decisive.’

‘*The human heart is like a ship on a stormy sea driven about by winds blowing from all four corners.*’

‘What’s that?’

‘Something Luther said in one of his recent addresses. What do we do about these ships, First Master?’

‘There is little we can do at the moment, is there? Continue to covertly monitor all communication through the orbital platforms to find out who is on the ships and why they are here. If the Lion has returned, then it’s all over for Luther.’

‘And for us? You just explained how we are getting closer to the Grand Master. We actively put down a move against Luther’s push for independence. The Lion needs little enough reason to judge against us as it is.’

Astelan’s stare slid skywards, as if his eyes could pierce the low grey clouds and see into the ships millions of kilometres away.

‘You are right, of course,’ the First Master said quietly. ‘We could be labelled traitors too. We must tread warily for the next ten days, or until we know who is coming to visit.’

‘And if we learn the Lion is not aboard? He would not come unannounced, surely.’

‘My recollection of Zaramund tells a very different story, Chapter Master. We must prepare for whatever eventualities we can think of. I will do what I can to ensure our true loyalty can be proven if needed. I require you to keep a close eye on matters in the Angelicasta. There are too many unknowns for my liking. Zahariel still missing, ships returning, Lord Cypher spending nearly every waking hour with Luther. Circumstances are unfolding, Galedan, and we must endeavour to stay abreast of them.’

Galedan nodded and then lifted a fist to his chest in salute. The Chapter Master departed without a further word, his brow no less furrowed than when he had entered.

Circumstances indeed, pondered Astelan. Whether it boded well or not for his personal future, the arrival of the ships surely marked a change in the tale of Caliban. His eyes returned to the cathedral-like upper storeys of the Angelicasta and his thoughts turned to plans and motions that would ensure his continuing part in that tale.

SEVEN

The search continues

Caliban

To the casual observer, the conclave of individuals gathering in a near-forgotten dungeon on the outskirts of Stormhold might have looked suspicious. The four Space Marines arrived separately, robed and cowled in heavy cloth. Their bulk was impossible to hide, even without war-plate, but they moved with quiet ease down the brick-lined passages of the ancient sublevel.

They came together in the light of a few candles, in a circular chamber beneath the northern wall of Caliban's third largest city. The four warriors arrived in silence and remained unspeaking for some time.

To the casual observer, such would have been the scene. To Vassago, the gathering was anything but covert.

The psyker had brought his fellow Librarians to this place to escape the mental noise of Stormhold's four million souls. The age-old stones around the psykers acted as a buffer against the whirling thoughts of the masses of humanity above. Here they were closer to the stone of Caliban, the roots of the mountains.

There might have been silence to the ears, but to any observer with psychic sense, the agitation and concern of the gathering brothers was like a babble that washed down the dilapidated passages. Like a bow wave before a ship, the thoughts of Vassago's gifted brethren moved ahead of them, betraying their presence.

There was much to worry the psykers, but Vassago did his best to quiet their concerns with an aura of calm and authority. His mind touched briefly on each of his three companions, reminding them to calm their thoughts, to be the serene pool into which the power of the warp would swell.

+It is difficult,+ Tanderion replied to this psychic easing, his words conveyed by thought not sound. +All around us the warp roils and swirls. How do we keep that anarchy from entering our minds?+

+With practice,+ Vassago answered. +With strength. These are lessons Master Israfael taught us, why do you forget them now?+

+Master Israfael is dead, Master Zahariel is missing.+ Brother Cartheus was the youngest and newest of their company, his talent discovered only ten years before. His jade eyes and fair hair made him look remarkably like the Lion,

unusually pale amongst the bloodstock of Caliban. Cartheus' thoughts were jittery, jumping from one thing to the next. +The ships were detected, why do they not contact us?+

+Calm extends from within,+ Vassago told them sternly. +Cease the pointless speculation of these things. Focus your thoughts on our purpose.+

+We have tried to find Master Zahariel before – why do you think we will succeed this time?,+ asked Brother Athadrael. +When will you accept the truth of what has happened? Master Zahariel is dead, most likely murdered by that traitor, Lord Cypher.+

+Why?+ asked Cartheus. +Lord Cypher obeys Luther – why would the Grand Master wish our leader disposed of? To what end?+

+Perhaps the Lord Cypher did not act on the orders of Sar Luther, but to protect his own position out of jealousy,+ suggested Tanderion. +Master Zahariel said that Luther was relying heavily on the work of this company.+

+Zahariel is alive.+ Vassago sent a pulse of admonishment with the thought, silencing the others. +We have come to Stormhold to be closer to the ruins of the Northwilds. If we cannot locate him from here, our next step will be to travel to the Northwilds arcology itself.+

+If our intent is supported by Sar Luther, why do we conduct our rituals in secret?+ asked Tanderion.

+Knowledge of our powers needs to be closely guarded, brother. Others would seek to control us, to manipulate us to their ends. It is common for the mundane to be fearful and jealous of psykers, it serves no purpose to flaunt our abilities openly.+

+And this "Edict of Nikaea", of course,+ added Athadrael. +Our company is still banned under threat of censure from the Emperor. That Luther bade us continue in our extraordinary duties is already an act of treason against the Throne.+

This sobering fact quieted the mental tumult as the group were united by a singular unease at this thought. Vassago used the lull to try once more to focus his brothers on the task at hand.

+We must search for the trail,+ he announced. +I shall ride as the horseman, Tanderion bears the spear, Athadrael and Cartheus are the hounds.+

There was no more dissent and the other psykers fell to their familiar roles, conjoining their powers through Vassago. As the strongest of them, though far inferior to Zahariel, he bore the brunt of the psychic shock as power poured from the warp into the minds of the Librarians. Each was trained in deflecting that power, harnessing its passing strength, but Vassago was like a reservoir, taking all of the energy from their dammed minds to direct into a single conjuration.

He pictured himself on Caliban-as-was, riding through the forests like a knight errant seeking one of the Great Beasts. The combined power of his brothers was the black destrier between his legs, the mind of Tanderion a broad-headed golden spear held aloft in his hands. Cartheus and Athadrael followed behind, loping along as smooth-coated coursers ready to chase down any spoor they encountered.

The illusion carried his thoughts out from the grey-walled castle of Stormhold and into the deep forest, heading north along the mountain valleys. Athadrael and Cartheus streaked ahead to pick up whatever scent they could find of Zahariel.

He had been here, the shuttle logs showed as much. The Master Magus had left with Lord Cypher by special command of Sar Luther. Their destination had been listed as Windmir, but the psychic trail led in the opposite direction, into the Northwilds.

Vassago slowed, calling back his hounds so that they might scour the track with more rigour. Across Caliban the warp was imprinted like a layer of snow that only the psychically gifted could see. The footprints and drag marks and criss-cross of trails recorded a hidden past. Beneath them, the frozen mud captured a yet older history, and down into the rocks themselves it was possible to feel the echoes of what had been, from before the time of the Lion, even to the days of Aldurukh's founding.

It was tempting to get dragged down into those depths, to explore the hidden roots of Caliban, but Vassago chained his curiosity, pulling tight the reins of his imaginary destrier.

Around the Northwilds it was as though a blizzard had passed, obliterating almost all previous signs. The faintest of traces remained of Zahariel's passing – like two lines of footprints so shallow they were barely discernible. Both entered, only one departed.

Vassago wanted to push on but felt resistance. The hounds were before him, hackles raised, teeth bared, chests emanating deep growls. The knight raised his eyes from the path and saw a figure stood before him, clad in armour chased with green, a cloak and hood of leaves swathing him. A naked sword with an emerald blade flashed in the sunlight…

Shocked, Vassago dispensed with the conjuration, letting the illusion fall into splinters around him, leaving the four psykers standing in a circle facing each other. They hurriedly turned as one towards the door.

A solitary figure stood there, one hand resting on the pommel of his blade, the other lightly placed on the grip of a bolter at his other hip. He wore powered war-plate, painted black and marked with the sigil of the Order – a red sword vertical over a white escutcheon. Much was covered with a heavy green robe, tied at the waist with a white loop of rope, as free of blazon as the armour.

‘Lord Cypher.’ Vassago forced the words through gritted teeth.

‘Brother Vassago,’ replied the warrior known to act as Luther’s right hand. ‘I believe you were told by the Grand Master to concentrate your efforts on identifying the ships that have broken warp. Yet, here I find you have slunk away from Aldurukh on some quiet errand.’

‘It is no business of yours,’ said Vassago. ‘Regardless, we continue to seek Master Zahariel. An effort that would gain Sar Luther’s approval.’

‘It is not for you to decide what would or would not be to the liking of the Grand Master. These rites are dangerous.’

‘What would you know of the dangers of warpcraft?’ said Tanderion. ‘Your mind is as blank as fresh vellum.’

‘To that point, how was it that you blocked my projection?’ Vassago sent a wordless command to his companions, who stepped to the left and right, forming a line in front of Lord Cypher. ‘Have you concealed something from us? From the lords of the Legion? That would be a very serious matter.’

‘It would,’ said Lord Cypher. ‘However, the power to interrupt your ritual was not mine. It was borrowed.’

Before anyone could ask from whom Lord Cypher might borrow psychic power, the chamber underwent a subtle change. Vassago could not pinpoint exactly what had happened, or when, but it felt very much like a door being quietly closed, cutting off the sound from a neighbouring room. One moment everything was normal, the next he felt his psychic sense muffled.

Half a dozen figures had appeared in the shadows between the pools of candlelight. Each was no taller than waist-high to the Space Marines, clad in a deep robe that showed nothing of the face or hands. Six pairs of eyes glowed scarlet in the gloom.

Watchers in the Dark.

As much part of Aldurukh and the Order as stone walls and boltguns. Vassago had never before heard of them venturing beyond the fortress of the Order, and their presence was deeply unsettling.

‘I…’ He mastered his discomfort. ‘No disrespect was meant, Lord Cypher. Forgive my confrontational attitude, you took us unawares and returning from the midst of a psyquest leaves one’s nerves in disarray.’

‘I see.’ Lord Cypher relaxed, his hands moving from his weapons. ‘A misunderstanding.’

As imperceptibly as they had arrived, the Watchers were gone. Visibly at least. On the very edge of awareness, Vassago could still feel them, like the echo of old footfalls heard through a wall. Or perhaps it was the sound of someone approaching from afar but yet to be seen. Past and future seemed blurred.

‘We will concentrate our efforts on establishing contact with the arriving ships,’ said Vassago. ‘I cannot give you much hope, Lord Cypher. It would require another of our special talent to receive such messages at this distance, and no means other than conventional communication to reply. Since we have received no contact, mundane or otherwise, it’s reasonable to conclude that the ships are not willing, or able, to send a message. It was the reason I thought it prudent to locate Master Zahariel. He is the most powerful of our company and might succeed where we have failed.’

Lord Cypher looked from the face of one psyker to the next, gauging each of them in turn.

‘I see. Should you contact Master Zahariel, or otherwise discover what has happened to him, you will inform Sar Luther immediately?’

Vassago thought about the Watchers. If they were assisting Lord Cypher, there was very little that would pass within the walls of Aldurukh unknown to Luther’s right hand.

‘Of course,’ the Librarian assured Lord Cypher. ‘We serve the Order and Caliban.’

‘I have a gunship waiting,’ said Lord Cypher, turning slightly to invite them towards the arched door. ‘Unless you have anything else to keep you in Stormhold?’

The psykers did not look at each other, but exchanged the mental equivalent of nervous glances. Without comment, Vassago stepped towards the door and the others followed.

EIGHT

Contingencies

Caliban

All factors considered – the main one being that it was a prison – the dungeon beneath Aldurukh was quite hospitable. There was a clear, antiseptic tang on the air and the gleam of fresh polish under bright lumenstrips. The majority of the guards were clothed in the uniform of Lady Tylain's auxilia. It was a waste of resources to have Space Marines on guard duty.

At least that was a good enough reason given by Luther, but Astelan suspected that the Grand Master was wary of allowing legionaries to act as wardens for legionaries. In this instance, the loyalty of the auxilia was probably more secure. They were overseen by a few captains of the Order, chosen by Luther with due care, as were the Techmarines who were the architects and installers of the cells.

The walls and ceiling were freshly whitewashed, the signs and maps as clear and bright as anything else. The style of Old Caliban had inevitably crept in, with curved archways and tunnel-like passages, but the security doors, force field projectors and scanning arrays were all Terran-standard technology.

Coming to another checkpoint Astelan stopped to allow a retinal scan of his right eye. The system acknowledged his identity and did likewise with Galedan a moment later. The two of them stepped past the solid plasteel door as it slid aside. With barely a hiss it closed behind them, sealing them into the inner dungeon where the officers were held.

'It's always puzzled me,' said Galedan as they continued down the corridor, passing locked doors to the left and right. The passage branched every ten metres, more cells lining the side tunnels. 'The lack of tech-priests. Mechanicum, I mean. The other Legions are full of them, but ours… Why so few?'

'The First existed before the alliance with Mars,' said Astelan. 'Before even you were born, when they were not even the First, but simply the Six Hosts. Our earliest wargear came from the laboratories and manufactories of the Emperor, not Mars. I suppose it helped keep the First independent to continue like that even after the Sol system was united.'

'It's impossible to imagine,' continued Galedan as Astelan turned left down a branching corridor. 'What was it like in those days before the Legions?'

‘It was bloody, and it was anarchic, and life was short for many,’ the First Master replied quietly. He smiled. ‘And it was amazing. You can never understand, my friend, what it was like to fight for the Emperor Himself. The Thunder Warriors did well, but they could never conquer the galaxy. They had uses, but the Emperor needed something more, someone better. Space Marines. Warriors to take the fight beyond Terra.’

They stopped outside a cell and Astelan looked steadily at his companion. A thought occurred to him.

‘We have always been mutable, my friend. The Dark Angels, the First, the Six Hosts of the Angels of Death. Different names for the same thing. The Emperor’s finest. The vanguard. The first blade unsheathed.’ He laid a hand on Galedan’s arm. ‘Try for a moment to see the galaxy as I saw it. Forget the primarchs. We did not know they existed. Perhaps the Emperor thought them lost forever. We were not even the First Legion yet.’

‘That, I don’t understand,’ confessed the Chapter Master. ‘Surely you were always the First?’

‘Why would we be the First unless to distinguish us from the Second? We were not even a Legion at the outset. Six Hosts, each with its own purpose and structure, but linked by common origin and purpose. Perhaps the Emperor always intended matters to take the course towards the formation of the Legions, or perhaps He simply learned how to organise His crusade as it unfolded. We were not legionaries. He did not even call us Space Marines, not at first. When He addressed us, when He spoke of us to His last few enemies, He simply called us His Angels of Death.’

Galedan shook his head slowly, not out of disagreement but simple amazement.

‘There are few left in the galaxy that have seen what you have seen, First Master. The first steps from Terra, into the void. The pacification of the lunar colony, the pact with Mars, the clearance of the Solar System. The foundations of the Great Crusade itself!’

‘And so much else,’ Astelan said with a nod. ‘Who do you think first took Zaramund? Sailing the warp into the unknown with only the light of the Astronomican to reassure us of the way back? Did you think it was the Luna Wolves that found Horus?’

‘You were there?’ Galedan was open-mouthed with astonishment.

‘No,’ said Astelan. He let out a short laugh. ‘I was speaking more generally, not of my own exploits. My earliest campaigns were on Terra. For others to go to the stars, some of us had to make sure there was a world to come back to.’

‘All of the years we have served together, it never occurred to me to ask such questions. We were all Dark Angels. I never thought of the time before I became a legionary, I assumed it had always been the same. What did you do on Terra?’

‘No.’ Astelan’s expression hardened. ‘It is not a conversation for this time. Just remember that the Lion, the Order, anything that happens next is irrelevant. We are still the Emperor’s Angels of Death.’

The First Master raised a hand to the keypad next to the door. He glanced at Galedan.

‘Say nothing when we are inside.’

‘Of course, First Master. My silence will be golden.’

There seemed to be the smallest hint of insincerity in Galedan’s quick nod of the head, but Astelan forced himself to assume it was imagined. The biggest risk with any change to the chain of command was the encroachment of ill discipline. On Caliban, loyalties were becoming so fractured, the web of power so convoluted, Astelan saw everyone as a potential threat now. Paranoia was not just a consequence of the changing times, it was a necessity.

The First Master keyed in the lock code and pulled the door open. On the metal bench inside sat a grey-haired Space Marine, clad in a baggy pair of linen trousers and short, buttonless tunic of the same pale material. He turned his head slowly and his lips formed a sneer as he saw who was visiting. His hands formed fists in his lap.

‘Chapter Master Tukon,’ said Astelan, stepping inside. ‘You know Chapter Master Galedan?’

Tukon said nothing and continued to stare a hole through Astelan. The door thudded shut, disproportionately loud in the silent cell. There was a pallet opposite the Chapter Master and Astelan sat down.

‘Ships have arrived,’ Astelan told the prisoner. ‘As the ranking officer in this… facility, I thought you should be told.’

Tukon’s stare did not change for a moment. He folded his arms, revealing snake tattoos running across bulging pectorals. The two serpents disappeared over his shoulders and reappeared at the Chapter Master’s throat.

‘We were angels in the Host of Fire together,’ Astelan murmured, genuinely disappointed by Tukon’s naïvety. ‘Why did you get caught up in this idiocy?’

Nothing came back. Tukon’s knuckles were growing whiter by the second. The veins and tendons in his forearms were like thick cords. Murder glinted behind his eyes, kept at bay by a will stronger than plascrete.

Astelan glanced at Galedan and saw that his companion was alert, a watchdog waiting for the command, eyes fixed on Tukon. The First Master thought he knew the prisoner well enough not to fear assault, but he had brought Galedan with him just to ensure nothing untoward happened.

‘We do not know who is on the ships yet, and I do not know what Luther will do when they come to orbit. But I will not let him hold you hostage. You have my word.’

The smallest shift in Tukon's gaze conveyed more eloquently than any words what he thought of Astelan's promises. The First Master had every intention of using the prisoners as hostages if required, but he had to cover all potential exigencies. The Chapter Master leaned back, his head resting against the wall. He slowly closed his eyes, his breathing slow and determined.

'There will come a time when you must lead again, Chapter Master.' Astelan stood up, not knowing whether his words would be heeded or not. He suspected the latter. 'This incarceration was a necessary misdeed. Not the first I have undertaken. You know as well as I what must sometimes be done in the name of victory. You are not my judge, only the Emperor may claim that role.'

He signalled for Galedan to open the door and followed the Chapter Master. As he reached the threshold, Astelan was stopped by the sound of Tukon moving. He spun around, hands rising to a defensive stance, but the Chapter Master had only brought a foot up to the bench.

'I'll be waiting,' he said without opening his eyes. 'Remember that, Astelan. I'll be waiting.'

The First Master left the cell, choosing to allow Tukon the last word. It mattered nothing in the grand scheme of things. Either Tukon would be useful or he would not, and any threats he made were irrelevant while he was trapped in a cell deep beneath Aldurukh.

Neither Astelan nor Galedan said anything as the First Master took his companion to another cell, just a few corridors away.

Astelan was about to key the opening code when Galedan laid a hand on his superior's arm and stopped him.

'Why don't you leave him in peace?' asked the Chapter Master. 'Do you enjoy his misery?'

'Certainly not!' snapped Astelan, knocking aside Galedan's hand. He stared at his second. 'Have I really given you reason to think me cruel, Galedan? What other evidence might you present that I delight in the torment of others?'

The Chapter Master shrank back, cowed by the stern words.

'I…' His words faltered. 'My apologies, Master Astelan. I spoke out of turn.'

'You did.'

'I am worried, though. About his mind. These visits push him closer to breaking, I think.'

'Then he must break,' Astelan replied. 'He is no use to our cause as he is. Perhaps when broken he can be reassembled in a manner more functional to our needs.'

Galedan said nothing, but he looked doubtful.

The door opened, revealing the shimmer of an energy field within, casting all beyond it with a faint blue tint. The occupant of the high-security cell looked up,

his face contorting with rage the moment he set eyes upon Astelan.

‘Traitor!’ the Space Marine roared, leaping to his feet. ‘Underhand, honourless betrayer!’

‘Captain Melian…’ Astelan began, but the prisoner stormed towards the field and smashed his fists against it, creating azure ripples in the air.

‘You are lower than the scavenging curs of Coldarian.’ The Space Marine spat, and thick saliva fizzed into vapour against the field. ‘The beetles of the forest mulch have more dignity, more worth than a spineless coward like you. There is no pain, no contempt, no abasement terrible enough to atone for the crime you have committed against your brothers.’

The ranting continued for some time, which Astelan weathered with crossed arms and an impassive stare. After several more minutes during which his lineage, character and actions were thoroughly denounced Astelan watched Captain Melian claw wordlessly at the energy barrier, his face twisted with such rage as he had never encountered before.

‘Listen to me,’ barked the First Master. His tone of command cut through even the apoplectic ire of Melian, years of psycho-conditioning bringing the captain to a standstill in a heartbeat.

Melian’s eyes focused on Astelan, comprehension returning.

‘There are ships coming, brother,’ Astelan told his former subordinate. ‘If I need you, I will send Galedan. The two of you will lead others to take Aldurukh from below. If Luther resists the return of the Lion, you must help us restore the authority of the Dark Angels.’

‘The Lion is returning?’ Melian’s fervour had dissipated like fog beneath the summer sun.

‘We cannot know for sure,’ Astelan replied. ‘I do not think Luther will welcome him with open arms as he once did.’

‘And I am to believe the man that put me in this prison? The one that betrayed us to Luther?’

Astelan could see the anger returning and knew he did not have much time.

‘To position you here, beneath the throne room where he holds his false rule. I kept you alive, all of you, so that we would be ready. Luther looks on me with favour now, and with each day I get closer. When the time is right I shall strike, and Galedan will come for you.’

Melian looked at the other Space Marine, seeking reassurance, familiarity.

‘It is better this way,’ Galedan told the captain.

‘What about weapons?’ asked Melian.

‘Against Tylain’s auxiliaries?’ Astelan forced a chuckle. He lifted up his fists and flexed his fingers. ‘These are the only weapons you need. Why do you think I advised Luther to staff this prison with humans and not Space Marines?’

There was still disbelief in Melian’s gaze but it was better than the unthinking rage that had greeted them. This time Astelan wanted to be sure he was understood.

‘When Galedan comes, you must act,’ he told Melian. He fixed the captain with a stare. ‘I will be relying on you.’

He turned away before Melian could comment, and pressed the door control, cutting off anything the captain might have said. Astelan could feel Galedan’s stare upon him but did not turn.

‘You think that I weave these plots for amusement, a diversion to keep me occupied during our exile from the Legion?’

‘Maybe not for amusement, but I don’t see why you have to keep spinning plan after plan in such a convoluted way. You clothe us in the titles and garb of the Order, claim to fight for Caliban, but muster hope of the Lion’s return, whilst seeking to avenge yourself upon the primarch, and in secret speak of striking down Luther. It is, maybe, an obsession, First Master.’

Now Astelan looked at his companion. ‘It *is* an obsession, brother. Loyalty and duty must always be so.’

‘Loyalty to whom? Sometimes I’m not sure why we’re fighting, or who for.’

‘For the Emperor, Galedan.’

‘We are walking a perilous road. Do you really have a plan, Astelan?’

‘A plan? Why be so prosaic? Plans change. We will simply take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves. Whoever is on those ships, whatever happens next, we will use it to our advantage.’

‘That’s reassuring,’ Galedan said with a tone that conveyed that he was anything but reassured.

NINE

Harsh words

Ultramar

The last time he had awaited the arrival of the Lion, Roboute Guilliman had been filled with concerns of a different kind. The primarch of the Dark Angels had arrived with all of the ceremony and grandiosity that befitted his station, and Guilliman had stood upon the eve of the great proclamation of Imperium Secundus.

On that occasion the Lion had made a great display of his arrival, descending upon Magna Macragge Civitas with all the spectacle of a compliance action. The primarch of the Dark Angels had made every effort to impress upon anyone that witnessed their arrival that they were the First Legion, the finest. Flawlessly choreographed and executed manoeuvres had brought dozens of drop-ships to the plaza of the Martial Square, a show of force as well as precision.

This time there was no showing off. The void shields and defence screens of the city momentarily flickered apart to allow the ingress of a lone Stormbird. As they powered back into life above it, gold glinted briefly along the gunship's flank.

Uncertainty had marked that historic day. An uncertainty that the Lion had also felt, the primarch had later revealed. As the Lord of the First had made his entrance his fleet had been stood at the ready with drop pods and gunships prepared to invade Macragge at a single command.

Such was the trust the Lion held for his brothers.

Guilliman wondered if the Lion had taken similar precautions again. The Lord Warden was in no mood for his brother's suspicious nature. He took a breath and slowly let it go, creating a small cloud in the winter air. It was chill atop the principle landing dock of Hera's Gate but it afforded a view across almost the entirety of the civitas.

The lord of Caliban had certainly shown little enough regard for his brother primarchs on this occasion. Tasked with bringing the Lion back to Macragge following the incident at Sotha, Guilliman had tried the beacon, astropaths and even conventional transmissions to contact his brother, with no success. That the Lion had returned now might be coincidence, or perhaps the result of receiving Guilliman's messages without being able to reply.

More likely, thought Roboute, the Lion had simply wanted to keep the manner and time of his arrival as secret as possible. Perhaps for good reason, but perhaps not.

The Stormbird touched down two hundred metres away, settling perfectly onto the designated landing space of the apron. A brief flurry of the engines sent a blast of air washing across the primarch. A flourish, even now, to remind any onlooker that a lord of lords had arrived.

Watching the ramp descend, Guilliman confessed inwardly that it was not the Lion that was responsible for his tension. The primarch of the Ultramarines had made a mistake. A very bad mistake. Admitting such to his brother would be difficult, made all the more so because Guilliman knew the Lion would not care for any explanation.

He would have to do that which he was loath to do – trust the Lion would not seek to make personal gain out of a shared disaster.

The Lord of Caliban descended alone. Long, quick strides brought him closer to Guilliman every second. The Lord Warden considered his first words, weighing each carefully in his thoughts, knowing that the Lion's attitude would be shaped in those opening seconds of communication.

'What has happened?' the Lion demanded before he had reached Guilliman.

The rehearsed words, carefully considered sentiments and reasoning fled like startled birds before the unchained anger of his brother. In three words Guilliman's failure was writ large, the Lion becoming the embodiment of the primarch's self-judgement.

Guilliman hung his head, unable to force out the words. Suddenly they seemed to be trite, just so many platitudes.

'Sotha? Why has the warp beacon fallen dark?'

'The Night Lords attacked. We were able to prevent the destruction of the beacon, but it can no longer function as fully as it once did.'

'The Night Lords. Then Curze *was* at Sotha.'

Guilliman hesitated, knowing that the truth was even worse than his brother thought. 'Only his Legion. Curze was here all along. He never left Macragge.'

The Lion was immobile, rendered as a statue for several moments as he absorbed this information. A flicker of the eyelids betrayed an internal dialogue that Guilliman could only guess at. When he spoke, the Lion's voice was flat, devoid of feeling. Stunned, Guilliman was forced to admit.

'Never… left… Macragge…'

Another twitch, the slightest shake of the head, frozen like a cogitator encountering a terrible paradox in its program code. A widening of the eyes as reality asserted itself, implications springing into life like water streaming through the cracks in a weakened dam.

‘Our brother-emperor?’ the Lion became animated, almost grabbing Guilliman by the shoulder. ‘Has anything happened to Sanguinius?’

‘He lives,’ Guilliman assured him. ‘He is unharmed.’

‘But something happened?’

‘I will show you.’ It was easier that way. Let the evidence speak, the admission becoming tacit. Share the blame. ‘Come with me, brother.’

An armoured grav-carrier took them over the buildings of Macragge Civitas, avoiding the triumphal way of the Avenue of Heroes, away from the eyes of the populace. The Lion glowered out of the firing slots at the city sliding past, his silence a deafening accusation in itself.

‘How progresses the war against the dregs of Lorgar and Angron?’ It was a cowardly question, voiced to turn the attention of both to another matter. Guilliman hated himself for asking, but did not regret it.

‘Dregs, as you say,’ the Lion said bitterly. ‘Enough spite to kill millions, but no threat to the Imperium. The true criminals have escaped retribution for the moment.’

The silence returned, even more pregnant than before. Guilliman had chosen to come alone, to leave Euten and Gorod and his other counsellors. Their absence was probably for the best. The Lion would feel outnumbered and become more defensive. Only Faffnr Bludbroder and his Space Wolves insisted on following, once again referring to their orders from Malcador the Sigillite to monitor and guard Lord Guilliman. As a compromise, considering Faffnr had also felt the need to duel with the Lion on their last encounter, the ‘watch-pack’ were presently restricted to another grav-carrier.

Guilliman leaned across the troop compartment and activated the vox-link to the driver.

‘Take us over the portico,’ he said. He stood up and opened the entryway. Wind whistled past the hatch as the grav-carrier descended towards the Fortress of Hera.

The Lion stood at his shoulder, gazing past.

For a moment a buttress obscured the view, but then the transport rounded one of the outer towers and the remains of the antechamber were revealed.

Servitors and blade-prowed Rhinos worked at the rubble left by the collapse of the grand portico, overseen by Techmarines in blue and red. Shattered columns and broken masonry had been scattered, broken like a child’s model. The scorch marks of an intense fire clearly marked the windows of the surrounding galleries. Walls and towers close at hand were pocked by shrapnel and debris impacts.

‘There are still the bodies of two Sanguinary Guard buried there,’ Guilliman said softly, shaking his head. ‘We recovered the rest and have taken them to the Chapel of Memorial.’

The Lion said nothing as he stared down at the ruin.

‘Another counter-strategy by Curze,’ Guilliman said with a sigh. ‘The antechamber was rigged with explosives linked to a terminus-sensor in the armour of Commander Azkaellon. In the event of attack breaking through, the failsafe would destroy the chamber and anyone within, and seal the throne room. Curze was able to bypass the security measures and lured the guards into their own booby trap.’

‘Where is the emperor?’ The Lion turned away, his expression grim. ‘Take me to him, now.’

Guilliman excused his brother’s tone, though on other occasions he would not take so kindly to being commanded in such an imperious manner.

‘Of course. Sanguinius is holding state from the Praetorium since the attack.’ Guilliman closed the hatch and joined his brother. ‘Truth be told, he has spent most of the time by himself. He sees a few petitioners each day. I pass him daily reports but he responds little. He is very concerned by the loss of Sotha’s extra capabilities.’

‘The empathic teleportation? It was unreliable even before.’

‘And temporarily losing the beacon must have taken a toll,’ Guilliman added. He decided to be diplomatic. ‘Ships off-course, delayed, some perhaps lost for good. Sanguinius tasked me with recalling you to Macragge, but I assume you did not receive my communiqués. It is a relief that you made it here at all. And so swiftly, brother – your Navigators must be the best in the Imperium.’

The Lion shifted in discomfort at this line of discussion, and looked away. ‘We were fortunate.’

Guilliman left it at that, but there was clearly more to be said. Perhaps the Lion had already been returning to Macragge when the disaster had happened? Guilliman forced himself to stop speculating. Events had proceeded with enough uncertainty already; there was no point adding to his woes with pointless second-guessing of his brother’s intentions.

The carrier deposited them on a lawn close to the outer gates of the western chambers of the Fortress of Hera. Squads of Ultramarines patrolled the gardens and corridors, parting for the new arrivals. A few dozen metres behind, the Space Wolves shadowed them, sensible enough not to intrude upon the business of the primarchs. Even so, Guilliman could sense them, another irritation he would dearly love to dispense with.

They located Sanguinius by the presence of his guards. Four of them had survived the attack, their golden armour scorched and broken in places. Azkaellon stood with them, his left arm missing from above the elbow. He stepped forward, his one hand moving to the blade sheathed at his waist.

‘You could not stop a primarch with both arms, as I recall,’ the Lion snarled. He strode up to Azkaellon, barely giving the commander of the Sanguinary Guard a glance, his attention fixed on the unassuming double doors they protected. ‘Do you think to stop me now with only one?’

Guilliman raised a hand to halt any retort by the Blood Angels warrior.

‘We require immediate audience, commander,’ he said. He dropped his voice. ‘How is he?’

‘Of course, Lord Warden,’ Azkaellon replied with a bow, carefully directed towards Guilliman alone. ‘Lord Sanguinius has been… in reflection for the last three hours. He awaits your company.’

TEN

A brother hanged

Caliban

The Northwilds arcology was marked by the scars of battle and neglect, its surface towers and domes already succumbing to the elements. Rents in the plasteel and ferrocrete bled greenish-grey lichen and the tendrils of climbing plants like the pus of untended wounds. The scorch of las-marks, the chip of bolt impacts and the glassy sheen of plasma blasts stood testament to a troubled past.

A tower near the western limit of the overground structures trembled as though a mast caught in a suddenly veering wind. It swayed, masonry crumbled, metal supports creaked and bent. Foundation stones shifted, appearing to crack, and slid away from beneath the weight of the tower. The whole edifice trembled, fresh cracks travelling up the surfaces of the surrounding domes like eggs cracking from within.

The tower toppled outwards, slowly, gracefully, its component parts breaking away from each other as it descended by a force other than gravity. Shards of ferrocrete and buckled shafts of plasteel settled on each other as a fissure opened up at the base.

The crack in the ground widened further, several metres from jagged edge to jagged edge. With barely a sound, the pieces of shattered building landed around the newly opened chasm, seeming to form steps and arches.

A gleam of yellow light, the flicker of a flame impossibly strong, lit the fissure from within. Dust swirled like smoke, parting to form a path of clean air as a shadow appeared in the light.

Silhouetted, a broad-shouldered figure marched up from the depths, ascending the crazily formed stairway, curves of melting masonry forming arches, towering but disturbingly formless shapes overhead.

Reaching the surface, the figure stopped, shielding his eyes against the early morning sun.

Zahariel looked around for a few moments enchanted by what he saw.

Caliban was alive.

Not just the plants, the birds and the beasts, but the world itself. Zahariel looked on his home world with eyes clear for the first time. There was life, energy, everywhere, rising from the heart of the planet, coiling around the rocks

and trees, soaring into the skies. Beyond the clouds he could see the tendrils still, a shining web of energy that knitted Caliban to the fabric of the material universe. But about those tendrils was something else, a sheathing of blackness that turned them not into anchors but shackles. Caliban strained against these primordial, immaterial bonds, its shrieks and bellows unheard by any ears.

He had thought the Ouroboros was an enemy, devouring Caliban from within, seeking to corrupt it. The Terran sorcerers had tried to bring it forth to destroy the Dark Angels, but even they did not know the truth of what they had sought to unleash.

The Ouroboros *was* Caliban. This simple revelation had set Zahariel free.

The Ouroboros *was* Caliban.

The Ouroboros *was* Caliban.

Those words had shown him the futility of trying to destroy the thing. He could no more kill it than he could kill a whole world.

More than that, he no longer desired to kill it. He had always loved Caliban, and now he loved it even more, having seen its beating heart, its emergent spirit given form. Caliban knew him too, and had spoken to him as it had tried to speak to him in the past.

The coming of the Imperium had broken that bond, for all Calibanites.

Before that, even. The coming of the Lion and the destruction of the last of the Great Beasts. They had laid oppressive chains upon Caliban, binding it to their will, seeking to break its spirit and exploit its body.

Israfael's teachings had been nothing more than lies to blind Zahariel to the truth. The training he had received from the Chief Librarian, the tenets of the Librarius and the Emperor, were a cloud to obscure true knowledge.

Zahariel had forgotten how he had seen Caliban as a child, the memory scratched out by the chants and rituals and dogma of Israfael. Just as the Terrans had built the great arcologies on the surface of Caliban, the Librarius had taught Zahariel to erect walls within his soul.

Soul.

It was a word that had fallen into disfavour with the coming of the Imperial Truth, but now Zahariel found use of it again. The spark of life. The embodiment of all that was non-physical in a person. Their presence in the otherspace of the warp.

No wonder that the Emperor suppressed such thoughts. Zahariel had seen the soul of Caliban and his own was part of it.

A different sort of Enlightenment to that preached by the iterators had come upon Zahariel and it was his task to propagate it. Others would be shown the way, in due course. Their eyes would be opened to the truth.

More than anything else, Zahariel knew he had to protect what he had found. For the time being the Ouroboros – Caliban's soul – had to be kept secret, kept safe.

Zahariel opened his mind, truly opened his mind for the first time in decades, and allowed the power of Caliban to pass into him. A serpent of energy rose from the depths, drawn by his will. He spread his arms and allowed it to lift him up, robe fluttering as he rode the power into the air. Pausing for a few seconds, a hundred metres above the ground, Zahariel glanced back at the fissure that had released him.

His presence removed, the stones were reverting to their inert nature, falling into heaps of ruin and rubble. Towering likenesses of the Ouroboros turned to piles of metal and brick. Dust settled on the debris like a shroud.

Zahariel felt a last impelling thought of purpose pulse from the incarnation of Caliban buried beneath the arcology, warming his soul.

He turned southwards, the power of the planet speeding him towards his destination faster than any gunship or shuttle. Within the hour he would set eyes upon Aldurukh and a reckoning with the man that had left him for dead: the Lord Cypher.

Zahariel stopped about five kilometres from the city. Aldurukh was a strange amalgam of the past and the present, of Caliban and Terra, of harmony and discord. In its roots Zahariel could feel the ancient stones of the world, even now glowing with the power of Caliban. Like the furnace that drives an engine, that power was the force behind the Order, unknown to a hundred generations of knights since Aldurukh had been founded.

It was no wonder the Lion had, by a tortuous route, come to this place of all the warrior chapters on Caliban. His presence lingered still, a veil over the old power of Caliban, tainted by the iron nails of Terran discipline and denial that held down the energy of the Ouroboros trying to burst forth from below.

The bulk of the city hummed and throbbed with the minds of its populace, human, Space Marine and animal, each part almost nonexistent, but as a whole forming a powerful mass of will.

And in the pinnacle, in the heights of the Angelicasta, there was something else. It was bright and small compared to the embers of Caliban's soul in the foundations, but there was power there.

Luther's library.

It had once belonged to the Knights of Lupus, texts on the Great Beasts, the semi-corporeal *nephilla* and the power from which they sprang forth. There was rumour aplenty on the contents of those ancient tomes, and now that knowledge was being freed, unleashed upon the world through Luther's indulgence.

Zahariel smiled. The Order could not survive, not in its present state. It was too powerful, too united. As much as Luther sought to be free of the Lion's legacy, the pre-eminence of the Order would always be the primarch's greatest achievement and the one that Luther could never bring himself to overturn. But if Caliban were to be freed, if the Great Beasts and the nephilla were to roam again and the Ouroboros liberated from its physical prison, the Order had to perish. Humanity had to be fractured, conflict had to thrive for Caliban to grow strong on the turmoil.

Her soul required sacrifice, her soil required the nourishment of toil and blood.

Something approached from the south-east, quickly resolving itself into the shape of a Thunderhawk gunship. Zahariel dropped like a stone, only stopping his fall a few metres from the ground. He came to rest beside a cracked road, its surface pitted and half overgrown. It had not been used since the building of the overland expressway, a ribbon of metal and ferrocrete that snaked across the continent on a two-hundred-metre-high viaduct just a few kilometres away.

He let his mind stretch out to the gunship and its occupant, for he detected a solitary mind at the controls. His probing thoughts rebounded from a mental shield, its existence and shape identifying the pilot as easily as any successful scan.

It was Vassago.

The gunship put down less than twenty metres away, dirt and dead leaves swirling around Zahariel. The front ramp descended and Vassago hurried out, expression caught between hope and incredulity.

'I knew I was not mistaken!' the acolyte declared, his uncertainty resolving into a broad grin. 'It was your thoughts I felt on the shifting winds.'

'You are correct. My absence has forced you to push yourself further than I could have hoped possible. Your abilities have improved dramatically.' Zahariel realised that his own powers were far beyond what he had been capable of before he had been taken by the spirit of Caliban. He drew his essence back into himself, wary that Vassago would detect the change. It was odd to look at his protégé now, seeing the bars of the cage Israfael's teachings had set around Vassago's mind, just as they had confined Zahariel's thoughts. One day soon he would pull them away, freeing his pupil to roam farther than ever before.

'I should have contacted you earlier, but I was in haste to return to Aldurukh.'

'Understandable, master,' said Vassago as Zahariel started towards the Thunderhawk. 'We have all been anxious for news of your return.'

'All? I think there is at least one that will not be greeting my arrival with welcoming clarions.'

Vassago stopped at the bottom of the ramp and allowed Zahariel to precede him, following a step behind.

‘I do not understand, master.’

‘The Lord Cypher,’ said Zahariel, picking his words with care. ‘What has he said of the events that befell us at the Northwilds?’

‘Nothing, to us. He has shared his counsel only with Luther, as far as I know.’

‘Unsurprising.’ Zahariel paused and turned as he reached the hold of the gunship. ‘He would not be keen to confess his cowardice to a wide audience.’

‘Cowardice?’ Vassago pushed the ramp controls as he passed. With a hiss, the assault portal closed, plunging them into gloom.

‘Yes, cowardice, Vassago. He left me to die beneath the Northwilds. Did he tell you that?’

Vassago said nothing, which was for the best. Zahariel was not in the mood for platitudes.

‘Do you know if the Lord Cypher is in Aldurukh?’ he asked.

‘I believe he is.’

‘Then let us get back without delay. I would not have him wait longer to make reparations for his betrayal.’

The look of consternation from Vassago stopped Zahariel as he moved towards the cockpit.

‘Something wrong, brother?’

‘I would avoid confrontation with the Lord Cypher,’ Vassago said, releasing each word reluctantly. ‘He has… *allies*.’

‘Of course he has allies. Luther, for one. When I have told my side of events, his friends will not stand by his actions.’

‘The Watchers, master.’ Vassago glanced around as though one of the creatures might materialise right there in the gunship. ‘Lord Cypher has made a pact with the Watchers in the Dark. They protect him. He interrupted our sessions, shielded from detection by them. We should not turn our faces against the guardians in the shadows.’

‘Interesting.’ Zahariel stroked his chin, thoughtful at this news. If it was the case, and he had no reason to doubt Vassago’s testimony, it was a complication. The spirit of Caliban had no love for the creatures known as the Watchers, though all tradition held that they were protectors of the world. Zahariel had seen that they were nothing but gaolers. ‘My thanks for the warning.’

The two of them passed into the piloting suite. Zahariel deferred to Vassago at the controls, taking a place at the gunner’s station.

‘Call the others together, Vassago,’ Zahariel said. ‘I must speak with them urgently.’

‘I understand, master. They are abroad on their duties, it will take some time.’

‘I will have plenty to occupy me,’ Zahariel assured his lieutenant. ‘First I must present myself to Sar Luther.’

‘And then?’ asked Vassago, his enthusiasm returned. ‘What do we do then?’

Zahariel had to think for a few moments before replying.

‘That will depend very much on him.’

Luther steepled his fingers and leaned forward with his elbows on the large desk of his study. He silently regarded the three figures before him, looking at each in turn for several seconds.

What a cast of characters, he thought, taken straight from an ancient morality play. They all thought they could use him for their own ends. Use Caliban. They saw his weaker body and could not help but assume, even unconsciously, that the mind was weaker too. He had seen it in the Lion as well, though not at first. Unquestionably genius, strategically and tactically superior to any native of Caliban, but the primarch had a terrible flaw: a blindness to people and their weaknesses. The Lion’s paranoia, hidden behind the armour of discipline and duty forged by the Order, always granted others more credit than they deserved, thinking them clever, bold, noble or ambitious when they were no such thing.

Luther looked at his visitors and saw them for what they were. He knew the chinks in their armour better than they did. Better to feign weakness, though, and let them struggle amongst themselves than to reveal his real strength and unite them against him.

The first was Astelan, the schemer. Old, wily, focused. The First Master had admitted straight to Luther that his only desire was to avenge himself on the Lion. He owed nothing to Caliban or Luther other than as an ally of the moment, one that would rarely take centre stage but preferred to call his lines from the wings. That made Astelan the best of them, in a way – while the Lion remained abroad, the First Master would do all he could to keep Luther in power as the best means to vengeance.

Next was the Lord Cypher, the young traditionalist. He was clad in a heavy robe, his face obscured beneath a deep hood. Luther’s enforcer, supposedly, but there was more to the mysterious warrior than simply guarding the lore and customs of the Order. His agenda was not yet clear to Luther, but the catastrophic events in the Northwilds, both historically and in the recent past, had been a catalyst of some kind. On the surface it appeared that the Lord Cypher was as loyal to the Order as the role dictated, but he took counsel and perhaps command from another also.

And lastly the idealist, Zahariel. Doubtless his return had sent the other two into a frenzy of fresh evaluation, trying to work out whether this was good or ill for their own plots.

The Librarian was the most dangerous directly, possessing the power to enforce his will upon the others if he ever desired it. Of the three, it was Zahariel that Luther most needed to remain loyal to the Order and his cause. Also, fortunately,

the most likely to do so. A son of Caliban, dedicated to the Order for his whole life, a trusted companion through Luther's most trying times.

Independently capable of astrotelepathy, able to read minds, judge lies and truth, see within the hearts of others… Yes, Zahariel and his psykers were formidable. Astelan had loyalty amongst some of the Chapters, and still maintained hopes for the warriors held in the cells. Lord Cypher could, in theory, call upon the Order to cast out their Grand Master, but could never directly command. But Zahariel posed a greater threat, and was potentially a superior weapon to both of the others.

Each of them with their own reason to support Luther, but only for as long as they considered him more useful as an ally than an enemy. To an outsider it seemed that without them, without this inner circle of men, he had only his charisma and the status of his position to protect him.

An outsider would be wrong.

'Lord Cypher, I have received a fresh account of the recent episode at the Northwilds,' said Luther. The warrior's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Zahariel. 'You did not tell me that Sar Zahariel urged you to depart when the arcology started to collapse. If not for his testimony, I might have laboured under the illusion that you abandoned him. I owe you an apology.'

Lord Cypher shifted in what might have been surprise.

'The decision was mine to make, Sar Luther,' he said evenly. 'It was the prudent course of action but one I took with a heavy heart. I am curious how Sar Zahariel was able to survive when the tunnels began to fall.'

'The benefits of his unique talent,' Luther replied for the psyker. 'Where physical armour was absent, the protection of the mind was present.'

'Our search parties could not locate you,' added Astelan. 'I personally led the first teams into the ruin.'

'I was deep, brothers, very deep,' Zahariel replied quietly. 'Your augurs and surveyors had no chance. Even my fellow Librarians could not find me. It was a combination of fortitude and fortune that I happened upon a shaft created by the fall of several subterranean chambers, the materials of which had shielded me from your searches.'

'Fortitude and fortune, both qualities required in those remembered as great,' said Luther. 'One of my forebears once claimed that he would rather have a lucky general than a good one.'

The others said nothing to this, each trying to assess their rivals according to their internal plans. Luther allowed the tension to rise for a moment. It served him better that they chased themselves and each other in circles. When the time came to declare his true intentions they would be looking anywhere but at the Grand Master.

‘In your absence, Sar Zahariel, it occurred to me that I had done you a disservice,’ Luther said after several seconds. ‘Lord Cypher is as much a part of the Order as Aldurukh and the furniture within it. I have granted Astelan, not even a native of Caliban, the title of First Master and with that authority over most of our warriors. But you, a noble son of the forests, born and raised in sight of the Angelicasta and trained within its walls, have been dismissed. Your title, Librarian, is a Terran shackle, laid upon you by Israfael and the other Imperials. The Librarius is a name empty of meaning, defunct. You have been left in the cold rather than warmed at the hearth of the Order.’

‘I desire nothing, Grand Master, save to return to my studies and to continue to monitor the recruits for signs of psychic talent as is my remit.’

‘I will make no greater demand of you, but will give you the resources you deserve to push further into the darkness of ignorance so that you might return with the light of knowledge for us all.’ Luther opened a drawer and pulled out an iron ring, on which hung three large keys. He held them easily in one hand, the metal clinking gently. ‘In the days before we were born, before our great-grandfathers first laid eyes on the green of the forests, the Order was charged with seeking out those with the talent you possess. Just as now, the risk of sorcery, the threat posed by witches and warlocks, was of concern to the Grand Masters. Amongst their number were the Mystai, possessed of psychic power. These keys belonged to the Master of the Mystai. They are now yours – I have never used them, nor has any other for more than a hundred years. I do not know which doors they unlock, or what lies behind those portals, but I see even now that you detect something from them.’

Zahariel nodded and held out a hand, looking at Luther for permission to take the keys. The Grand Master nodded and handed them over. The psyker’s eyelids fluttered and a brief spark of gold appeared in his pupils.

‘I know their home,’ Zahariel said with a smile, the evidence of his power vanishing as quickly as it appeared. He gripped the keys in his fist.

‘Brothers, welcome the new Master of the Mystai into the ranks of our council,’ Luther said, bowing his head to Zahariel. ‘I am sure he and his disciples will serve the Order well.’

Astelan and Lord Cypher added their own acknowledgements, neither particularly pleased with the turn of events.

‘Let me not delay you from your duties any longer,’ said Luther. Dismissed, the three Space Marines saluted and left without further word, no doubt to speak to their confidants and peers about this fresh development.

When they were gone, Luther moved to the closed door and slid the thick bolt across to bar it. He then took a chain out from under his robes, another key hanging upon it. Unlocking the chamber’s side door he stepped into the library,

feeling the pulse of the books welcome his return. He locked the door behind him and stepped up to the lectern.

The book he had been studying was still open where he had left it, a slender dagger holding down the pages. The left-hand leaf was covered with a neat, rounded script in the ancient language of Caliban. On the right was a diagram of interlocking circles, a line of intricate runes spiralling around the edges and into the centre. It reminded him of the spiral used to train the recruits in personal combat, and of the organisation of the Order with its overlapping circles of responsibility and hierarchy. Structures that had existed since the earliest days of Aldurukh's founding.

All was surrounded by a more pictographic symbol, of a serpent swallowing its tail.

Luther read the caption inscribed below the diagram.

Of the nature of Order and Chaos; the Ouroboros.

ELEVEN

A cursed vision

Ultramar

Even to the Lion's superhuman eyes, the Library of Ptolemy was dark. Guilliman gestured for him to enter, stepping aside, and quietly closed the leather-lined doors behind them. The room was not large, not by the standard of the castrum, perhaps twenty metres by ten, and three high. Shelves and reading desks cluttered the gloom.The only illumination came from an ash-covered skylight that filtered the low winter sun.

Through the shelves of a bookcase the Lion saw a figure sitting hunched in a large chair at the far end of the library. Only his outline could be seen against the dim reflection on a glass-fronted cabinet behind – a noble face in profile and the pale smear of white wings draped over the back of the chair.

'A darkened library,' the Lion said, stepping around the obstacles as his eyes clarified the darkness into something he could navigate. The floor was carpeted but worn by much use, and he could smell the moisture and dirt that had been repeatedly trailed in from the gardens directly outside. 'Is this supposed to be a metaphor? Since when did the Lord Sanguinius dwell in the shadows?'

The regent emperor shifted, leaning forward so that his face came into the hint of light. He lifted a book that had been on his lap.

'I have been reading,' said the new Emperor of Mankind. 'My ears still ring, and my eyes still burn – I have not yet fully recovered from the proximity to the blast in my throne room. Sometimes it helps to come here.'

He closed the book and set it aside.

'Not everything has a dramatic reason, brother.'

'And you are otherwise unharmed?' the Lion stepped closer, examining every part of Sanguinius that he could see, searching for any sign of a wound.

'Aside from the eyes, physically untouched,' the emperor assured him. 'It was not on the outside that Curze wished to injure me.'

'Not on the outside?' Guilliman came up beside the Lion. 'What do you mean, brother? What did he do?'

'As I told you before, we spoke, at length. He did not listen.' Sanguinius looked away for a moment, his expression darkening. 'I needed to speak to you both at the same time.'

‘I am here now,’ said the Lion. ‘What did Curze say?’

‘Do not interrogate our brother!’ snapped Guilliman, interposing himself between the two other primarchs. ‘Remember your place.’

The Lion was shocked by Guilliman’s sudden vehemence. He lifted his hands in surrender and stepped back, looking past Guilliman to Sanguinius. There was something about the emperor that had changed. Faded, perhaps. He had admitted by omission that the Night Haunter had dealt him some kind of invisible blow.

‘I meant no interrogation, brother.’

Sanguinius nodded, accepting an apology that had not been explicitly made.

‘Curze wanted me alone. He wanted you dead, of course,’ a flash of a smile, swiftly gone, ‘but that’s understandable. He seemed to think I might understand him better than any of my brothers.’

‘Why?’ Guilliman asked quietly. ‘What could he possibly think he could say to interest you?’

‘We share a certain gift,’ replied Sanguinius. ‘A reflex, you might call it. The visions he has spoken of, the knowledge he has been granted ahead of its truth. I have shared glimpses of the future too. He chooses to see the worst.’

It seemed as though the Blood Angel was going to move away from the topic, but he sighed and looked squarely at the Lion.

‘I choose to see something else. To believe in warnings, not fate.’

‘But what of Curze, what did he tell you?’ said the Lion. ‘Did he let slip some clue as to where he might have been, where we can hunt for him now?’

‘Yes, but I will speak of that in a moment. He wanted to talk about chance and fate. To see if I believed one or the other swayed our lives.’

‘In what way?’ Guilliman was frowning, though whether it was Sanguinius’ story or the simple thought of Curze that vexed him was impossible to know. ‘Why such an elaborate plan for such a pointless conversation?’

‘Because he is insane, brother!’ snapped the Lion. ‘We must stop garbing him with a rationale he does not wish to possess. Curze probably could not tell us why he does the things he does, not in any way we understand.’

‘No, he was quite lucid for much of the conversation,’ said Sanguinius, his expression showing that he did not appreciate the interruption. ‘He wants to understand himself, to know what our father intended, to relieve himself of his guilt by apportioning it to the Emperor.’

The silence of the other primarchs betrayed their incomprehension so he continued.

‘Curze blames the Emperor for making him the way he is, as though our father intended to create a genocidal, nihilistic monster.’

‘Of course he did not,’ scoffed Guilliman. ‘What pettiness, to blame the Emperor for His own failings.’

The Lion said nothing. Curze was certainly insane, a shadow of what he might have been, but the question was not a simple one. What had made him – the Emperor, the forests of Caliban, or Luther and the Order? The truth was that many things had created the warrior called the Lion. But what of the likes of Angron, lobotomised to be a furious berserker, or even Lorgar, chastised for too much faith in the Emperor?

Even so, it made no difference. Choices had been made and sides chosen. Many of his brothers had chosen to oppose the Emperor and that invalidated any fraternal bond or empathy they might have deserved. Curze's continued persecution complex was simply guilt manifesting.

'You look deep in thought, Lord Protector.' Sanguinius' words were softly spoken but shattered the Lion's focus. 'Care to share your mind?'

The Lion shook his head.

'He never left Macragge,' Sanguinius said firmly. His expression saddened. 'I know why he really came to me. He came seeking something he cannot get from the Emperor any more. Something none will give him. Forgiveness.'

'Forgiveness?' snarled Guilliman. 'I would throw the rafters of my house on the flames that burn him if it helped! *Forgiveness?*'

He stuttered into a red-faced silence. The Lion looked away, hiding the sneer he had felt creeping across his lips.

'Exactly,' said Sanguinius, but the Lion was not convinced by his tone. 'Curze is deranged. He thinks he is *good*. That he is doing the Emperor's work, even now, perhaps. He wants to believe the Emperor made him a broken puppet so that he can convince himself he was right all along. Vindication, my brothers. He knows he cannot be forgiven, but he thinks his actions can be vindicated.'

'And he thought you would agree?' The Lion had to wonder why Curze might be led to believe that. He was mad, but in his madness he was shrewd and observant. He had manipulated events and his brothers far too smoothly to be underestimated on that count. 'Why so, my lord emperor?'

'He thought I would kill him.'

'I am sure you tried,' Guilliman said with a bitter laugh. 'Or considered it.'

Sanguinius shook his head. 'I did not. I could not. How could I kill something so wretched?'

'Mercy, for that creature?' The Lion took in a deep breath to reign in his ire. He let it out before continuing. 'Did he offer you his neck? You suspected a trick, yes? You did not strike because the offer was not true?'

'He was sincere. But you are also right. It would have granted him absolution. He would have taken it as a righteous death.'

'But he would have been *dead*, brother, all the same,' said Guilliman, and the Lion nodded in agreement.

‘No, that is not the way the universe works.’ Sanguinius moved his gaze away and stared into the shadows. ‘Stones in the water. Ripples that spread and touch others. Motion and reaction. All acts have consequences. Had I slain him in cold blood, the murder would be upon me.’

‘Execution, not murder,’ the Lion had to point out.

‘Murder. There can be no execution without trial.’

Sanguinius stepped into the darkness, raising a hand to his temple as though pained.

‘This is too much,’ the Lion said, grasping Guilliman’s arm. His anger was at Sanguinius but he could not vent his frustration at the Imperator. ‘You let Curze get this close?’

‘Let?’ Guilliman looked down at the Lion’s grip on his wrist and back up to the primarch, an eyebrow raised. The Lion did not release his arm.

‘Do not quibble over words. We were all agreed, each to our role. Neither you nor I can lead the new Imperium. Our brother is the Imperator Regis, the new leader of mankind, the seed of the future.’ The Lion’s voice rose to a snarl. ‘And you allowed Curze to lay hands on him!’

Guilliman wrenched away.

‘I allowed nothing! I was protecting the beacon at Sotha. What Imperium would we have if we allow the ruinstorm to bring back the division of the Old Night? Where was the Lord Protector? In theory you are the guardian, but in practical terms you were of no use.’

‘Insult me again, brother, and *theoretically* I will punch you in your *practical* face,’ snapped the Lion, raising a fist.

‘I am *here*, brothers.’ Sanguinius rose from his chair, his face a whiteness in the dark, moving silently and swiftly to stand beside them. He looked at each in turn. ‘Do not treat me as a precious ornament.’

‘You are no ornament, Lord Sanguinius, but you are precious,’ said the Lion. ‘We have staked everything on Imperium Secundus, and invested in you that power once held only by our father.’

‘For all his mistakes, in this our brother of the First is correct,’ said Guilliman. ‘Your survival is key to the continuation of Imperium Secundus.’

Sadness crossed Sanguinius’ face and he looked so forlorn for a moment that the Lion felt an emptiness in his gut. Guilliman reached out a hand of comfort but the Blood Angel avoided it, brushing a hand across his brow to smooth away his hair.

‘Then we will fail,’ said Sanguinius.

‘What do you mean?’ the Lion demanded as the Blood Angel turned away.

‘I…’ Sanguinius bowed his head, weighed down by his thoughts. After a few seconds he straightened, squared his shoulders and turned back to them. ‘I shall

die at the hand of Horus.'

Guilliman and the Lion looked at each other, trying to gain some meaning from the words.

'How can you know this?' asked Guilliman.

'Lies of Curze, I warrant,' said the Lion. 'His lips are fuelled by spite and nothing more. He tried to get into my head on Tsagualsa too.'

'I have seen it.' Sanguinius clasped his hands, wings folding around him like a cloak. 'I have *felt* it. Not from Curze, not a delusion. I have foreseen the confrontation. A waking dream, a nightmare echo from the future. Horus will come to Imperium Secundus and he will offer me a place at his side. I will refuse and he will cut me down.'

The Lion did not know what to say to this and Guilliman was struck equally dumb. Eventually Sanguinius smiled, though with little humour.

'There is still a little hope for us. Two hopes, in fact.' Sanguinius turned and picked up the volume he had been reading. It was a heavy tome that looked like a child's jotter in the primarch's hands. The Lion wondered why his lord needed a distraction, a reason not to look at his brothers at that moment. 'The first is that I am wrong. I do not think I am, but we cannot fall prey to the sentimentality of predestination. The second is that I am right but my sacrifice is not a vanity, but to a purpose. I do not meekly submit to Horus' deadly blow. Perhaps by my resistance he is undone, or one of you is able to finish what I begin.'

It was clear that he did not consider either of these a strong possibility, but it was so like Sanguinius to hold to the thought of hope wherever he could. It was the reason his brothers admired him, and the source of his humility that made him an effortless lord of lesser mortals. The Lion felt a rare moment of genuine love for his lord and brother, knowing that if he had been confronted by such a dark truth he would have been far less accepting of his fate.

In fact, he was not prepared to accept it even on behalf of another.

'This will not happen,' the Lion declared. 'It is a trick of the enemy, a ploy to unnerve us and weaken our resolve. We have suffered two insults of late, we shall not suffer a third.'

'There is nothing th–' Sanguinius began, but the Lion would not be rebuffed.

'Forgive me, lord, but it is not for you to say what can and cannot happen. You are the emperor, and your command is law, but I was appointed the Lord Protector and unless you wish to relieve me of that duty I will protect you.'

Sanguinius said nothing and Guilliman simply nodded his agreement.

'A shame that we do not have any spoor to follow,' said the Lion. 'Tell us more, perhaps something can be gleaned from the encounter.'

'More than gleaned,' said Sanguinius. 'Curze hid in the Illyrian quarter. He confessed as much to me. Taunted me with the knowledge that he had never left

Macragge, had been here in the city all of the time we sought him.’

‘The Illyrian quarter?’ The Lion stared at Guilliman. ‘That would be the same Illyrians that conspired against your liege-father and continue to rabble-rouse against your rule and the Imperium? Curze would find no shortage of supporters and hiding places amongst their kind.’

‘I have already re-evaluated our defences and protocols,’ Guilliman said quickly when the Lion rounded on him. ‘He most assuredly is not in Macragge Civitas now.’

‘Your forgiveness also, Roboute,’ the Lion continued, though there was no longer any apology in his tone, ‘but I care nothing for your assertions of security. It is not so much the case of locking the stable door after the horse has bolted, as entrusting the same ignorant stablehand with repeating the task he performed so insufficiently before.’

‘Ignorant stablehand?’ Guilliman restrained his temper with obvious effort, his hand strayed towards the hilt of the blade at his waist and then rose to point accusingly at the Lion. ‘You were not here! I had to protect Sotha! I destroyed their fleet, and an army of Night Lords there! Enemies that *you*, Lord Protector, were supposed to keep from our gate…’

‘You are right,’ said the Lion. ‘You are right. I should not have left. Even I underestimated his insanity. Which of us in our right mind would have stayed on Macragge with all the wrath of three Legions upon him? But Curze is of no right mind and here he is, not a thorn in our side but a dagger poised above our heart.’

‘There is nothing more that can be done,’ Guilliman tried to assure him.

‘There is,’ replied the Lion, his laugh short and bitter. ‘I know you, Roboute. Your theoretical and your practical approach to life’s challenges. One eye kept on the horizon, planning, preparing, consolidating and accommodating. I err towards the practical. Action. Achievement. You love Imperium Secundus as only a father can and you will do everything a father would to protect it, to nurture it and to teach it right from wrong.’

The Lion directed his next words to Sanguinius rather that Guilliman, turning his back on the other primarch.

‘I am the Lord Protector. It is my duty to ensure our defence from any threat, be it from outside or within. There is no greater threat than Curze, a canker right here on Macragge. Perhaps even still within the civitas, regardless of our brother’s assertions. He toys with us, distracts us, perverts us from the goals we seek. While he is here nothing is safe, Imperium Secundus cannot grow.’

‘What are you asking for?’ Guilliman demanded.

‘I ask for nothing.’ The Lion glanced over his shoulder in irritation and returned his gaze to the emperor. ‘You have given me what I need already. You

appointed me as Lord Protector and oaths were sworn. It is upon my honour to uphold the responsibilities placed upon me. And it is upon yours to let me do so.'

'There can only be one Emperor,' warned Guilliman.

The Lion whirled about, stopping himself an instant from striking the primarch of the Ultramarines. Guilliman stepped back, startled.

'And I will protect him!' the primarch of the Dark Angels roared. He threw out an imploring hand to Sanguinius. 'Brother, stand by your oaths. Free my hand from the bondage of personal niceties. You entrusted your life to me. Now it is time to prove that trust.'

'What would you do?' asked Sanguinius. He looked at Guilliman for a second and then back at the Lion. 'What has our brother not done that you will?'

'Macragge has been a fortress from without, but it must be fortified from within. Martial law. A total suspension of contact with any ships that have not been thoroughly inspected. Quarantine, if you will. Curfew. Searches. Surveillance and investigation without limit. There will be no shadows to hide Curze, no cracks for him to move along, no gaps to fall through. Nothing will pass upon the face of Macragge without my knowledge.' The Lion slowly closed his fist as if he held the world in his hand. 'It is what our brother has done that I will not that is more the matter.'

'And what is that?'

'Shown restraint.'

It was several seconds of silence before Guilliman spoke, moving past the Lion to stand next to Sanguinius.

'The decision is yours, my lord,' he said with a bow of the head. 'I would not allow this – it moves against everything we have sought to build. The new Imperium will never be broken from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.'

Sanguinius nodded and the Lion took in a sharp breath. He was ready to make further argument for his case, but the Blood Angel met his gaze and silenced him with a look.

'What you say is true, Roboute, but only to a point. Our brother is right, we each must be a pillar of the new Imperium and if we remove one support the whole edifice will crumble. Curze will not stop unless we stop him. With the beacon of Sotha reduced to a fraction of its power the Imperium will need strength and guidance more than ever, and that is your task. Though we have defeated many foes of late, the war is not over, there are battles to be waged. It is for this reason we swore to uphold the commands of our brother from Caliban. If he is not worthy of such a duty, then you cannot be the statesman of the Imperium and I cannot be its emperor.'

Guilliman signalled his capitulation with a resigned look and a nod of the head. The Lion looked at Sanguinius and could only guess at the new emperor’s thoughts. Was he simply acting as peacemaker, maintaining the illusion of hope until his foreseen demise? Or did he truly believe in Imperium Secundus and the part it would play in guiding the future of mankind?

Did it matter? Not to the Lion.

He knew what needed to be done. It had been his weakness, his hesitation on Tsagualsa, that had allowed Curze to escape. This time he would leave nothing to chance. Before the winter finished, Curze would be dead by his hands.

It was a pleasing thought, and he suppressed a smile as he bowed to Sanguinius.

‘Thy will be done, my emperor.’

TRIUMVIRATE

TWELVE

The law of the Lion

Ultramar

‘You have doubts, brother.’

The Lion stated it without question and knew Guilliman was required to answer as the two of them paced a long balcony on the southern aspect of the Fortress of Hera. Thirty metres below them a company of Praecental Guard marched towards the Porta Hera, their footfalls in unison.

It was almost dusk, the day spent in long discussion about the Imperium, Sotha and preparations for the declaration of Legatus Militant that would suspend the civil authorities of Macragge and hand executive power to the Imperial Triumvirate.

‘No. I have fears, brother. Grave fears.’

The Lion stopped and looked south across Macragge Civitas. The city was sparking with thousands of lights as twilight encroached, and beyond he could see the blue plumes of plasma jets rising from the landing fields. He could smell salt amongst the fume of traffic and people, as the wind shifted to come in from the sea. His silence invited Guilliman to continue.

‘Every action begets a reaction. Have you considered that Curze wants us to assume absolute authority? He wages a different war from us, for objectives we cannot guess at.’

‘He is insane, lashing out blindly at any target. A wounded, maddened animal trying to protect itself.’

‘You heard Lord Sanguinius’ account as well as I did, brother. Curze’s madness has an endgame. He seeks justification, affirmation. Retaliation. You are giving him that.’

The Lion thought about this, knowing that he owed his brother the courtesy of proper consideration.

‘The alternative is to let him wreak havoc, across Macragge. Across the Imperium. Our new emperor said it. He must be stopped.’

‘That is not what he said,’ Guilliman argued. The other primarch sighed and turned away, leaning his back against the pale stone of the balustrade. ‘The practical application of more security brings about consequences that theory cannot predict.’

‘Such as?’

‘We are asking my Legion to stand against their own. This is Macragge, the world of the Ultramarines. Many of my warriors have connections here. Family ties. We were never meant to rule directly. You must understand the potential conflict this generates.’

‘Unforeseen consequences are just that, brother. What ruin will Curze bring about if we do not curtail him now? I cannot conceive of such a future.’

‘The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time.’ Guilliman straightened but did not look at his companion. ‘Tomorrow will bring protest. How will we deal with that?’

‘You will deal with it, brother. As Lord Warden, it remains your duty. I will be busy commanding my Legion.’

‘You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.’

‘I evade nothing.’ The Lion looked at Guilliman and could not guess what his thoughts were. It was a hard task the Ultramarines primarch had taken upon himself. The Dark Angel sought to alleviate some of that burden, allowing his brother the time and space to perfect the design of his creation. ‘And you need not concern yourself with conflicts of interest. My warriors will show no fear or favour in the application of their duties. Your Legion’s hands are clean.’

‘You cannot mean…’ Guilliman started, looking in shock at the Lion. ‘You cannot bring your Legion to Macragge.’

‘I have already issued orders, brother. You have admitted that your warriors cannot be trusted to guard their own.’

‘You think you can usurp me on my own world?’ Guilliman was almost hoarse, throat tightened by his distraught state.

‘*Our* world,’ the Lion replied. ‘The cradle of the new Imperium. Caliban lies beyond the ruinstorm, far from my reach. Half my Legion I left under the command of Corswain. I have given up my home, my warriors to join this endeavour. What are you willing to sacrifice?’

Horus had tried to take the Imperium for himself, and Guilliman had decided to build a new one. As much as he did not want to belittle his brother, the primarch of the Dark Angels knew that there could only be one winner in the war to come. There would be no second place. Curze had to be dealt with at any cost. *Any cost,* even Guilliman’s pride.

The Lion stepped close, his voice dropping.

‘Do you *trust* me, brother?’

Guilliman found her walking the long gardens on the roof terraces behind the Praetorium. Tarasha Euten, the Chamberlain Principal as others knew her, though to the primarch she was in all other purpose his mother. Her wisdom, her human

insight, was an essential part of him, as much as the statecraft and physical courage of Konor, his long-dead adoptive father.

She was tall, though dwarfed by his presence, and carried her years with dignity, or so it seemed. Perhaps she masked frailties in his presence, it was impossible to know. In a singular way it had been a blessing that Konor had died in his prime, though the ignoble manner of that death, cut down by a cowardly traitor, was no cause for gladness. But Guilliman had been spared the ordeal of watching his father become old, his body fading, perhaps his faculties too, even as Roboute would have continued to grow beyond the limits of any normal human.

Tarasha was of the mind to consider such a thing and spare him the worst of such distractions.

‘You are thinking about him,’ she said, sitting on a marble bench beside the hard-pruned remains of a bush. There had been no snow yet, but the garden was prepared for winter. She wore a heavy white coat, the collar and sleeves lined with dark fur. Her face was quite flushed by the chill, her hair neatly pushed behind a blue woollen cap. Her staff was propped against the arm of the bench. She caught his look. ‘Konor, of course, though I am sure you have been thinking of your true father a lot as well.’

‘How can you tell such a thing?’ he asked. He sat next to her, not wishing to loom over her with his bulk, but nearly folding his legs double on the low bench made him feel even more gigantic and ungainly next to her.

‘Stand,’ she said, ‘or you will fidget me to death.’

He stood, grateful, and started to pace, hands behind his back.

‘There is a wistfulness in your face when you think of him these days,’ she explained after a moment. ‘I can see your eyes looking into the past.’

‘I feel that I must succeed or fail *two* fathers,’ Guilliman admitted, stopping to run a finger along the branch of a coniferous tree overhanging the path. It was at head height for him, but to the gardeners it would have been no intrusion. Always there were reminders that he was an immortal trying to fit a mortal world. ‘I am not entirely sure he would approve of Imperium Secundus.’

‘If you were the type to seek approval for its own merit, Horus would have sent Lorgar as an ambassador, not a warleader. Tell me what this is really about.’

Guilliman took some time to gather his thoughts, searching for the words that would convey his nebulous and miasmic collection of hopes and fears about Imperium Secundus. In the end, it could all be rendered down to a simple statement, one that was almost impossible to voice. Euten waited expectantly, though he detected a hint of impatience.

‘Do I need to say it?’ she said, standing up.

‘No,’ Guilliman replied. He looked away and then back at her. ‘I do not think the Lion is an ally.’

‘I see.’ Euten rubbed her nose and pulled out a pair of black gloves from the pockets of her coat. She spoke as she slipped them on. ‘You cannot trust him. He likes his secrets. He has lied to you more than once.’

‘No man has a good enough memory to be a successful liar.’

‘But I thought that primarchs remembered everything.’

‘I take your point.’

‘He is also a character of action,’ she continued, turning to take up her staff. With slow paces she approached, her expression stern. ‘He excels at adaptation, the emergent strategist. Oh, he plans well enough, but it is determination that sees him to his greatest success. A determination to overcome everything set against him, despite the odds or the price.’

‘Give me six hours to build a tower and I will spend the first four measuring bricks.’ Guilliman smiled, but his humour quickly faded. ‘I have spent many hours building Imperium Secundus, but he will wreck it in the next five minutes. We have only just begun what we need to do here. Long on the theoretical, short on the practical.’

‘Is it so bad?’ Euten asked, leaning heavily on the staff, her breath coming in quick wisps. ‘Let him be the warlord, devote yourself to being the statesman we need you to be. You will stop him going too far. You and the new emperor. The Lion respects you and looks up to Lord Sanguinius.’

‘The Lord Sanguinius is distracted.’ The moment he uttered the words, Guilliman regretted it. Although he confided much in her, his Chamberlain Principal, the visions that Sanguinius had disclosed were a matter for primarchs alone, the business of the Triumvirate and no others.

‘He has a lot to occupy him,’ she said. ‘Another reason you must concentrate on what you must do and not second-guess others. Lord Sanguinius rules the Imperium, but you must *run* it. Manage the Lion as you would anything else.’

‘If he is of a mind to usurp me, and is my match in intellect, how can I stop him without resorting to force?’

Euten turned down the path, heading towards an ironwork arch in the hedge that surrounded them. She was almost out of sight when her reply drifted back to him.

‘That is easy, my son. It is time to start measuring bricks.’

The halls and corridors of the *Invincible Reason* rang with the clamour of battle preparations. The thud of armoured boots, whine of gunship engines and roar of armoured vehicles never failed to excite Farith Redloss. If he had not literally been born to war, it had certainly raised him like a mother.

It had started in an isolated stronghold in the Caliban forests, where each day brought attack from the beasts of the woods. Father, uncles, two brothers killed before he was six. He could load the wall-cannons by the time he was tall enough to lift the explosive harpoons.

Farith had been eight when the Lion and the Order had arrived, bringing with them the end of the beasts, but not an end to battle. Youthful, strong, obedient Farith had been an ideal squire to the lords of the Order, and by chance when the Imperium arrived four years later and the Dark Angels Legion started to recruit, his pre-adolescent physique had been perfect for the implantation of the Space Marine organs and gene-seed.

Not born a warrior, but crafted as one.

He stood on one of the gantries overlooking the main concourse that ran for most of the length of the battle-barge, towering twenty decks in height. From the highest level the lowest tier was swathed not just by distance but by a fog of coolant vapour and exhaust smoke. It just added to sensation, a reminder of the dawn mists that had surrounded the castle of his childhood, each day greeted with a mixture of relief and apprehension.

There was no more apprehension. He did not crave death, but he no longer feared it. He leaned on the rail of the balcony, admiring the lines of warriors moving from their dormers to the launch bays, steps ringing in unison.

He felt the approach of the Lion before he heard the whisper of war-plate servos and the strangely quiet tread on the steps behind him. For a giant, the primarch moved with the lightness and grace of his namesake. Truly a hunter of the forests in every way.

‘Everything is proceeding according to drill, my liege,’ Redloss said as he turned and saluted his primarch. ‘Stenius reports the fleet is dispersing to drop formations across orbit as you have ordered.’

The Lion said nothing, but looked past Redloss at the Space Marines below. He nodded to some unspoken query, his face impassive.

‘Would you forgive a question, my liege?’

‘I am not famed for my forgiveness,’ said the Lion. He held Redloss’ gaze for a moment and then smiled, though the expression lacked warmth. ‘Ask.’

‘Is this really needed? Why do we chain ourselves to Macragge when there are still enemies abroad in the Imperium? Is one world so important?’

‘The world? No. It is only remarkable because Lord Guilliman grew up here. But here we have placed the throne of the new emperor, and so it is here that our future will be decided.’ The Lion closed his eyes and leaned on the rail beside Farith. Redloss did not feel like interfering, though the primarch’s unusual openness unsettled him. ‘Lord Sanguinius. I have placed my trust, my faith in him. I cannot serve the Emperor and so I have found a surrogate.’

The primarch opened his eyes, their gaze hard as he stared down at the moving columns of troops. His nostrils flared as he took a deep breath.

‘Imperium Secundus must succeed. We…’ He faltered. Redloss wanted to be anywhere else than on that balcony at that moment, the hesitation in his lord more frightening than any foe on the battlefield. ‘I chose to come to Macragge because I feared that Guilliman wanted to replace the Emperor. Now I have become complicit.’

‘Has Terra really fallen?’ Farith asked quietly. ‘Since the elevation of Sanguinius, even before then, it’s been insisted that Horus has taken Terra. Such is the justice of what we have done. If not…’

‘Vanity,’ whispered the primarch. ‘If Terra has held, than this endeavour is nothing but the vanity of three fools.’

There followed a minute and more of uneasy silence. Farith wanted to be excused, regretting the decision to question his lord. That was another reason for the Wings, to act as confidants and advisors, away from the burden of command and the structures of hierarchy. He should have sounded out Danaes instead, allayed his concerns with those that understood them. It was not in the nature of the Dreadwing to question the motives of their commanders, openly or otherwise. Their existence was predicated on the removal of obstacles without recourse to explanation or justification.

‘I do not know,’ confessed the Lion, not looking at his subordinate. ‘It seems likely. Guilliman does not gamble. Sound theoretical principles applied with practical acumen. Imperium Secundus is the surest guarantee we have against Horus. Sanguinius is essential to Imperium Secundus. Guilliman’s theory, which we must put into practice.’

‘It is that I don’t understand, my liege,’ Redloss told the Lion.

The primarch straightened, his manner guarded. He drummed his fingers on the rail for a couple of seconds.

‘That was not really the answer you were looking for, was it?’

‘No, my liege.’

Farith gestured towards the Space Marines assembling in the levels beneath them. The tramp of their feet was blotted out every few seconds by the reverberating clang of launch-bay doors shutting.

The sound reminded Redloss of the underground shelters beneath the castle where he had grown up, used when a particularly large beast or a host of the nephilla came upon the settlement. The doors would crash closed like those of a tomb and the people would quail inside, wondering to what destruction they would emerge.

But the sound comforted him. It was not his mausoleum they signified, but the slamming coffins of his foes.

‘Who are we supposed to fight, my liege?’ he asked. ‘We are an army, not a policing force. If we drop on Macragge it is to wage a war. Who is the enemy?’

The Lion looked at him with a frown, of confusion more than anger, though the twitch of his lips signified some irritation.

‘I have already told you, Curze remained here while we chased across the Five Hundred Worlds.’

‘Yes, my liege, but how do you plan to find him?’

His primarch smiled then, and Farith Redloss did not enjoy the expression. It was as bitter and cold as a Northwilds wind.

‘Curze will reveal himself. He cannot hide forever. When he does, we will be waiting, and not Guilliman nor any other will stand in my way.’

The Lion stalked away, leaving Farith with an overwhelming sensation of relief. It was short-lived as the primarch’s words hit home. The crash of feet across the ship was drawing to a close but their martial beat rang true in Redloss’ thoughts, filling him with foreboding, but also excitement.

‘*First gunship away*,’ Stenius reported over the command vox. ‘*Destination, Macragge Civitas*.’

It was time for Redloss to head for his transport.

We have come. We are death.

THIRTEEN

The returning son

Caliban

‘I remember when all of this was forest.’ Zahariel did not look at his companion while he spoke, but across the landing aprons, craneworks and gantries of Aldurukh’s western approaches.

‘Joyous,’ replied Astelan. ‘I love the reminiscences of old Caliban.’

‘I remember the Stormbirds passing overhead. I was sat on a destrier alongside Nemiel, the Lion and Luther when Midris made planetfall here.’

‘Your life has been noteworthy, Sar Zahariel,’ said Astelan, though without conviction.

It was still strange to hear the ancient Calibanite honorific from the lips of the Terran. Like most of the Earth-born that had been returned to Caliban, Astelan had adopted many of the customs and forms of his primarch’s world – save for the long braids of hair he continued to wear. Zahariel wondered if he detected a hint of sarcasm in the use of the term, but a glance at Astelan showed that the Chapter Master was staring into the cloudy sky, paying little regard to the Librarian beside him. Astelan’s attitude might have been mistaken for boredom but Zahariel knew better. He did not need his psychic sense to pick up the other Space Marine’s apprehension.

‘The return of our battle-brothers is a cause for celebration, but you wear the face of a speared razorboar.’

‘If you remember so well the day the First Legion came to this world, tell me how did you feel then?’

‘Scared,’ admitted Zahariel. ‘Overawed.’

‘Uncertain?’

‘That too, but later. It was too much to comprehend, but I felt the burden of history descending along with those monstrous metal birds.’

‘A fundamental context challenge.’

‘If I remember the teachings of the Iterators correctly, that would be a situation that completely overwhelms a society or individual by revolutionising their contextual appreciation of the universe. Yes, if you mean an event that completely redefined the context of Caliban. One moment, we were a world alone in an

uncaring galaxy. The next, the latest addition to the Imperium, one of more than a quarter of a million worlds united under the Emperor.'

'Now, imagine what it was like for the Lion…'

Zahariel said nothing, lost in the memory of that world-changing event.

'The burden of history settles again,' said Astelan. He pointed to the west. A dark shape could be seen breaking the cloud line, like a massive eagle in silhouette. 'Do not be so sure it bodes well, Sar Zahariel. Keep your wits about you.'

'You think me giddy with excitement?'

'I think you have too much enthusiasm for the arrival of our brothers. Do not be so quick to welcome fresh change.'

The thud of boots and whine of armour caused Zahariel to turn. A column of armoured Dark Angels, fifty strong, ascended the steps to the broad platform of the main landing apron and arrayed themselves in several lines, bolters held across their chests.

'What is this?' the Librarian demanded. 'Are you expecting trouble? Do you know something I do not?'

'Relax,' said Astelan, though he did not heed his own advice as he looked pensively back up at the approaching Stormbird. 'It is an honour guard. Our conquering brothers deserve suitable welcome.'

Now Zahariel was agitated, unsure whether he trusted Astelan's explanation. He wished Luther was here to greet the arrivals in person, but the Grand Master had declared it would be better that the emissaries from the Legion were met by fellow Space Marines. Now that he thought about it, this explanation seemed weak to Zahariel.

'On the instruction of Sar Luther?' he asked Astelan.

'On my own initiative,' replied the Chapter Master. Astelan looked at Zahariel and smiled, a genuine look of humour that punctured the fog of nerves that had clouded Zahariel's thoughts for the last few moments. 'You should try using yours, now and again.'

Zahariel smiled back, suddenly feeling foolish for his doubts and paranoia.

'We have long waited for this moment,' he said, by way of explanation. 'The years have passed slowly, Sar Astelan, and my patience has been worn thin by their nagging erosion. Forgive my doubts.'

'Nothing to forgive, brother. We are all anxious to hear some solid news of what passes beyond the sight of Caliban. Much has happened in that time.'

'Do you think the rebel Legions have been defeated?' The hope sprang up in Zahariel's heart unbidden and he was surprised just how dearly he wished it to be true. 'Is this unseen war already over?'

‘Unlikely,’ Astelan replied. ‘If the campaign progressed so well, the supply drops might have resumed. No, I believe the war continues.’

Deflated, Zahariel waited in silence as the Stormbird turned in a wide arc and began its final approach for landing, circling once around the landing station before descending amidst the roar and flame of plasma jets. It settled heavily on the apron a few dozen metres away, a billow of hot air and dust gusting over the assembled Dark Angels.

With a whine and a clank, the ramp descended and a solitary figure walked down the gangway.

At first Astelan did not recognise the Space Marine advancing with swift strides across the ferrocrete. The new arrival wore armour of black but with a dark green shoulder pad. His face was a mess of scar tissue down the left side; three distinct ragged cuts slashed from nose to a missing ear. Astelan noticed that his left arm moved awkwardly and detected the additional hiss of bionics amongst the clank and whine of armour. His hair was dark and close-cropped, but it was the warrior’s eyes, a distinctive deep blue, that brought forth the memory of his name.

‘Chapter Master Belath.’

The other Space Marine looked at him with a hint of a sneer. ‘Astelan.’

Neither of them spoke for several moments, their stares locked together.

‘Salutations, Chapter Master,’ said Zahariel. The Librarian stepped forward and raised a fist to his chest with a nod. ‘Sar Luther bade us to welcome you back.’

‘*Sar* Luther?’ Belath turned his penetrating gaze to Zahariel. ‘Many are the customs of the Order that were adopted by the Dark Angels, but the titles of rank are not amongst them. Matters seem to have… regressed in the absence of our primarch.’

‘There have been changes–’ said Astelan. He was going to say more but Zahariel cut him off.

‘What news from the war? How soon should we expect the return of the Legion?’

‘I bring messages for Luther, no other,’ Belath said. ‘I will speak only to him.’

Zahariel was nonplussed but Astelan was not surprised by this admission. He stepped to one side and gestured for Belath to accompany him.

‘Come with us and we will conduct you to Luther’s chambers directly.’ Astelan spoke the words with formality, biting back what he truly wanted to say. ‘We will also have ready the quarters for your warriors. How many will we be hosting?’

The three of them strode across the landing apron, the guard of honour falling in behind as they passed onto the steps.

‘That will be unnecessary,’ Belath said. ‘They will remain in orbit ready to depart. Our stay will be as short as feasible.’

‘And the warriors on the transports?’ asked Zahariel. ‘How many have you brought back?’

‘The transports are for taking, not bringing. Their crews are adequately supplied for the moment.’

Astelan kept his silence at this intriguing piece of information, but Zahariel became quite animated.

‘So we are to be reunited with the Legion? Long we have hoped to be returned to the direct service of the Lion.’

A Land Raider waited for them on a ferrocrete roadway at the bottom of the steps. Astelan stopped at the open access ramp and turned, preventing the other two from entering.

‘You did not answer my brother’s question, Belath. Has the Lion sent for us?’

‘Such matters are to be discussed with Luther. Those are my orders.’ Belath waited for a moment and, when Astelan did not step aside, pushed past him. ‘The sooner you convey me to Luther, the sooner this will be resolved.’

Zahariel frowned as he looked at Astelan, about to speak. The Chapter Master dissuaded his companion with a brief shake of the head.

‘As you say, Chapter Master.’ Astelan stepped into the interior of the Land Raider and sat on the bench opposite Belath. ‘It will not be long before Sar Luther hears the truth of the matter.’

Zahariel hesitated before choosing a seat opposite Astelan, a little distance from Belath. The Librarian’s grim expression was in stark contrast to his excitement of only a few minutes ago.

With a hiss of hydraulics, the ramp closed, pitching the trio into a gloom broken only by dim red lights and display icons. The Land Raider’s engines growled into life and the tank lurched into motion.

The three sat in silence for several minutes, each keeping his own thoughts. It was Belath who broke the quiet, attempting to sound conversational with his tone.

‘As we descended, my Stormbird happened to pass over the Northwilds.’ Astelan caught Zahariel directing a sharp glance in his direction but kept his gaze firmly on Belath. ‘The arcology seemed in some disrepair. It looked to me as though the forest is growing back.’

Astelan detected accusation behind the casual words but Zahariel answered first.

‘A regrettable turn of events. Caliban has suffered some instability in the absence of the Lion. The arcology w–’

‘The situation was dealt with,’ Astelan stepped in, directing a warning glare at his companion. ‘A small but noisy insurrection amongst the administrators and

workers brought in from other worlds.'

'I see,' said Belath. 'That would explain some of the damage I witnessed.'

'Witnessed whilst merely passing over on your descent?' said Astelan. 'Your eyes are keen, Chapter Master.'

'It seems a waste to let a whole arcology fall to ruin as the consequence of a "small but noisy" insurrection. I hope that there have not been any other failings.'

'Choose your words with more respect,' snapped Zahariel. 'The Lion left Caliban in our care and we have not shirked our duty.'

'No insult was intended, Brother-Librarian.'

'Let Belath keep his accusations veiled, Sar Zahariel.' Astelan laid his hands in his lap as he sat back on the seat. The Land Raider's mechanism detected his presence and extruded two arms to disconnect his backpack from the rest of his war-plate. With a hiss of pneumatics the powerplant ascended into the space at the top of the alcove. 'His intentions will be made clear to Sar Luther and we shall know the truth in turn.'

Belath said nothing, turning his gaze towards the driver's compartment. The journey continued in heavy silence.

The closer they came to the gates of the Angelicasta, the more Zahariel could feel Belath's growing unease. Visibly nothing had changed in the Chapter Master's demeanour, but within the walls of his mind there was agitated activity. It was as though Zahariel could hear the sound of rushing feet and babbling voices, although the source of the sounds was hidden.

With his newly broadened perspective the Master of the Mystai could see the power of Caliban like a fog inside the Land Raider, pooling around himself, Astelan and Belath. With just a little effort Zahariel formed the energy into a hair-like strand, a tiny amount of power shaped by his will. He guided its tip towards Belath's skull, pushing it ever so gently between the protective bars erected by the Legion's training. Brute force would have alerted the Space Marine to the intrusion, but the slender tendril slipped comfortably into Belath's thoughts.

The contact lasted only a moment before the tendril shrivelled away, rebuffed by Belath's subconscious defences. But in that split second Zahariel touched upon the turmoil within the Chapter Master. He glimpsed something, a spray of blood arcing in the air. Belath guarded the memory as though it were a stronghold containing a precious treasure.

No, Zahariel realised – he kept it chained inside like the most terrible prisoner.

Even so, at the moment of connection Belath glanced at Zahariel and in the instant that their eyes made contact the psyker felt a pulse of a single overwhelming emotion: guilt.

It was very specific, directed at Zahariel personally. Whatever it was that absorbed Belath's thoughts, it had nothing to do with Luther, Astelan or the wider

situation of the Dark Angels. The Mystai wondered what could make a Space Marine feel guilty. The answer came swiftly, but he did not want to believe it.

‘Tell me something, Master Belath,’ Zahariel asked, trying to sound nonchalant. ‘Do you have news of my cousin, Nemiel?’

Belath’s look confirmed Zahariel’s suspicion before the words had left his lips.

‘Nemiel is dead, brother.’ And there again was that twinge of guilt.

It was the lot of a Space Marine to fight and likely die in the service of the Emperor. Zahariel and Nemiel had long ago acknowledged the possibility, as had all warriors of the Legiones Astartes. Why would Belath attach such significance to the news, unless he perhaps bore some responsibility for the event?

‘I see.’ Zahariel forced himself to remain calm although his hearts were beating faster. ‘That is most regrettable. How did my cousin fall?’

There was a pause before Belath replied, which to Zahariel spoke more than the words that followed. Why did the Chapter Master have to think so deeply on such a straightforward question?

‘We were aboard the Lion’s flagship, caught in a breach between our world and the warp. Entities attacked us, creatures made of the warp itself.’

Zahariel caught another flash of an image, seeping through the mental defences of the Space Marine. Nightmarish figures made of fire and of blood, hounds with scaled skin and a monstrous bird-like creature with two heads. And then the splash of blood again, thick globules hanging in the air like small feast-day decorations.

‘That was not an answer,’ said Zahariel. ‘How did my cousin die?’

‘It is not for m–’

Belath’s reply was cut off as Zahariel launched himself across the compartment of the Land Raider. Electrical circuits and light fittings exploded as the Master of the Mystai seized Belath either side of his head and summoned the power of Caliban. Like a wave the energy crashed up from the ground and swirled into the transport. Tracks locked and drives froze as psychic power crackled across the ceramite hull, bringing the massive engine to a skidding stop.

Belath was shouting something, grabbing at Zahariel’s wrists, but he did not listen. His golden stare drilled down into the Chapter Master, blades of psychic power visible only to him piercing the thoughts of the Dark Angel.

‘*What happened to Nemiel?*’ Zahariel roared.

Belath tried to fight the onslaught but his will broke in moments, shattering like a wall breached by the shell of a Vindicator siege tank. As his defences collapsed, Belath’s mind opened like a broken gate, revealing the road to the answer Zahariel sought.

He plunged the daggers of his thoughts into the target.

He stood at the edge of the strategium, monitoring the communications channels. Everything was in turmoil, the Invincible Reason *thrown astray and unshielded into the warp by a Night Lords attack. The flagship's systems were ablaze with reports of creatures materialising across dozens of decks. From the external monitors came a disconcerting cackling and giggling, punctuated by bass growls and monstrous bellows muted by distance. The hull throbbed with the surging power of the naked warp.*

The Lion stood at the centre of the main chamber. In front of him knelt a Dark Angel, a white tabard over his black armour, head bowed in obeisance. Surrounded by his personal guard, Brother-Redemptor Nemiel stood over the kneeling legionary, his pistol and crozius in his hands. The kneeling warrior's helm was under his arm, his face half-hidden behind long waves of black hair. It was Brother Asmodeus, formerly of the Librarius.

The rumble of the doors drew his attention away from the tableau. Corswain entered accompanied by the Navigators. The seneschal whispered something and motioned for them to stand to one side.

The Lion looked across at Corswain.

'Your timing is unintentionally impeccable, little brother,' said the primarch. 'I am faced with a dilemma.'

'My liege, I do not know what is happening here, but I am sure it can wait a while. We need your guidance. The ship is under sustained attack, from creatures that are almost impervious to our weapons.'

'The punishment of oath-breakers brooks no delay,' said Nemiel.

'Oath-breaker?' said Corswain, looking at Asmodeus. 'I do not understand.'

'My little brother has transgressed,' said the Lion, his tone even. 'Upon being attacked, he broke the Edict of Nikaea and unleashed the powers of his mind.'

'He performed sorcery,' snarled Nemiel. 'The same vileness perpetrated by the Night Lords that now threatens our ship!'

'That is to be decided, Brother-Redemptor,' said the Lion. 'I have not yet delivered my verdict.'

'The Council of Nikaea was absolute, my liege,' said Nemiel. 'Warriors of the Librarius were to curtail their powers. Asmodeus has breached the oath he swore.'

'Did it work?' said Corswain.

'What?' said Nemiel, turning his skull-faced helm in the direction of the seneschal.

'Asmodeus, did your powers destroy the enemy?'

The former Librarian said nothing, but looked up at the primarch and nodded.

'Interesting,' said the primarch, his green eyes fixing on Corswain.

‘I have seen first-hand what these things can do. They are…’ said the seneschal, hesitating. He took a breath and continued. ‘We face nephilla, my liege, or something akin to them. They are not wholly physical and our weapons do little damage to their unnatural flesh.’

‘They are creatures of the warp, lauded primarch.’ The group of Dark Angels turned as the Chief Navigator Lady Fiana approached. ‘They are made of warp-stuff, and the breach has allowed them to manifest in our world. They cannot be destroyed, only sent back. The gaze of our third eyes can harm them.’

‘Is this true?’ asked the Lion, stooping to lay a hand on the shoulder of Asmodeus. ‘Were your powers capable of harming our attackers?’

‘From the warp they come, and with the power of the warp they can be banished again,’ said the Librarian. He stood as the Lion changed his grip and guided the legionary to his feet. He met the primarch’s gaze for a moment and then looked away again. ‘Brother-Redemptor Nemiel is right, my liege. I have broken the oath I swore.’

‘A grave crime, and one that I will be sure to prosecute properly when the current situation has been resolved,’ said the Lion. He looked at Nemiel. ‘There are two others of the Librarius aboard – Hasfael and Alberein. Bring them here.’

‘This is a mistake, my liege,’ said Nemiel, shaking his head. ‘The abominations that attack us, these nephilla, are a conjuration of sorceries. I swore an oath also, to uphold the Edict of Nikaea. To unleash further sorcery will endanger us even more. Think again, my liege!’

‘I have issued an order, Brother-Redemptor,’ said the Lion, drawing himself up to his full height.

‘One that I cannot follow,’ said Nemiel, his tone hard though his hands trembled with the effort of defying his primarch.

‘My authority is absolute,’ the Lion said. He clenched his fists, his lips drawn back to reveal gleaming teeth.

A cold chill crept up the observer’s spine, as the Lion took on his name in countenance. He thought he saw something savage emerging, but the Brother-Redemptor was oblivious, or chose to ignore the warning signs. He wanted to cry out, to urge the Chaplain to cease his protest, but he feared intervening in the unfolding drama.

‘The Edict of Nikaea was issued by the Emperor, my liege,’ said Nemiel. ‘There is no higher authority.’

‘Enough!’ The Lion’s roar drowned out all other sound.

He was not entirely sure what happened next. The Lion moved and a split second later a cracked skull-faced helm was spinning through the dull glowing lights of the strategium, cutting a bloody arc through the air. Nemiel’s headless

corpse clattered to the floor as the Lion held up his hand, pieces of ceramite embedded in the fingertips of his gore-spattered gaunt–

Something smashed into the side of Zahariel's head, knocking him to the deck of the transport. A glittering trail of gold linked him to Belath until the connection was lost a second later.

Astelan moved forward, his weapon pointed unwaveringly at Zahariel's left eye. He was just moments from pulling the trigger, his face impassive.

The options screamed through Zahariel's thoughts. He could knock the Space Marine away with a raw blast of power. Blind him with a flash of light. Break the mechanism inside the bolt pistol. Swathe the Land Raider with darkness.

'We heard only that the Librarius was to be disbanded, nothing more.' He snarled the next words, barely containing his fury. 'What was so powerful about this edict that my cousin *died* for it?'

'The command of the Emperor Himself,' gasped Belath. 'All Librarians were to cease using their powers and return to the battle-ranks. There were to be no exceptions. I do not understand psykers very well, but your abilities were declared to be against the Imperial Truth. So said the Emperor, and so believed Nemiel!'

In the couple of heartbeats it took to process this, Zahariel expected to hear the report of the bolt. Nothing came.

Astelan stepped back, lowering his weapon. He thrust out a hand to push back Belath as the Chapter Master sought to gain his feet.

'Stand down!' the First Master snapped at both of them. He turned his frosty glare on Belath. 'Unless you wish for me to allow him to continue his examination, you will stand down.'

Belath darted an angry stare at Zahariel but made no further attempt to rise. Astelan returned his attention to the former Librarian.

'The Lion killed Nemiel,' said the Master of the Mystai. He raised his fingers to his temple and saw congealing blood on his gauntlet when he took it away. 'Took off his head.'

'The Lion is not here,' Astelan said calmly, holstering his pistol. He offered a hand to Zahariel and helped him up. 'Belath is the messenger, not the perpetrator.'

'If Nemiel's will had prevailed, we would have all been slain,' Belath growled. 'He had no right to defy the primarch.'

'A crime punished by death without trial?' replied Zahariel. 'I saw what you saw. The Lion killed him out of hand.'

The comm-unit was barking inquiries from the escorting vehicles and the driver was bent at the hatch to his compartment, concern written across his face.

'Is the Land Raider still operational?' Astelan demanded.

‘A few electrical systems overloaded, First Master, but it will run.’

‘Then why are you gawping at us? Get us into the Angelicasta!’

The driver swiftly retreated and the hull pulsed with the restart of the main motors. A few seconds later the rumble of the tracks reverberated through the transport. Zahariel tried to push aside the memory of his cousin’s death as seen through Belath’s eyes, but he could not.

The Lion moved and a split second later a cracked skull-faced helm was spinning through the dull glowing lights of the strategium, cutting a bloody arc through the air. Nemiel’s headless corpse clattered to the floor as the Lion held up his hand, pieces of ceramite embedded in the fingertips of his gore-spattered gauntlet…

A cracked skull-faced helm, spinning through the strategium, cutting a bloody arc through the air. Nemiel’s corpse clattered to the floor as the Lion held up his hand, pieces of ceramite embedded in the fingertips of his gore-spattered gauntlet…

Nemiel’s corpse clattered to the floor as the Lion held up his gore-spattered gauntlet…

A cracked skull-faced helm…

Nemiel’s corpse…

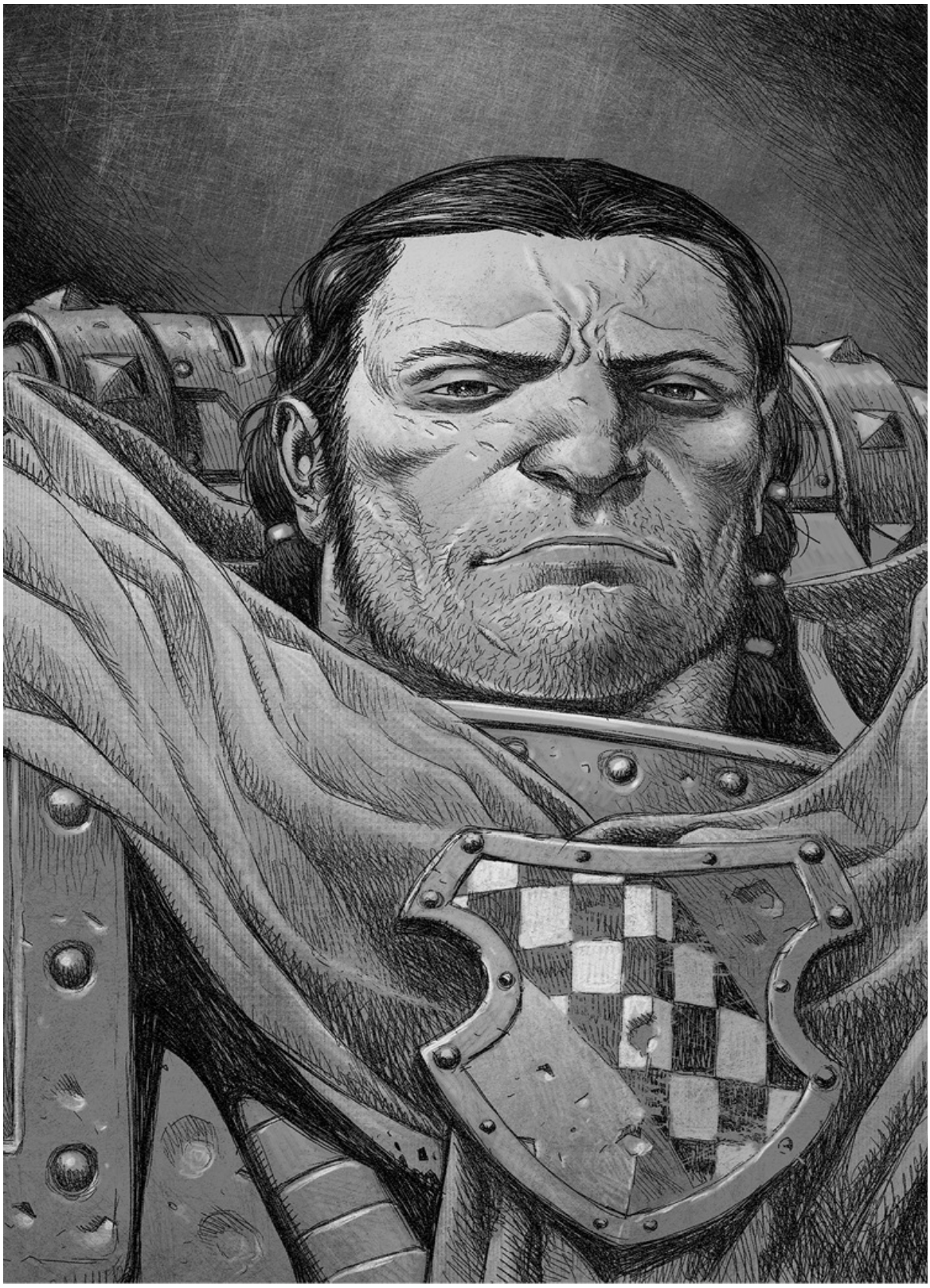
Gore-spattered gauntlet…

Zahariel wrenched himself from the trance at the weight of a hand on his shoulder. Astelan gestured for Zahariel to sit as he lowered himself back into his alcove.

‘Now you understand the nature of the beast that was awoken,’ the First Master said quietly.

‘Why are you here?’ Zahariel snarled at Belath, ignoring Astelan. ‘Why have you returned?’

‘I am beginning to wonder that myself,’ the Chapter Master replied.



Merir Astelan, Chapter Master of the First Legion

FOURTEEN

Signs

Ultramar

The ramp had barely touched down on the snow before the Lion was descending with long strides, emerging from the gloom of the Stormbird's interior into the pale winter sun. The midday light gleamed from the first snows on the Illyrian peaks to the north and west.

Holguin followed, along with several of the Masters and Paladins of the Deathwing. The Lion was grateful for his subordinates' silence as he stood with arms crossed, waiting for his brother to arrive.

In a blizzard caused by the downdraught of its wings, Guilliman's personal ornithopter descended to the mountainside. It was almost silent, powered by stacked atomic cells, a blue-and-white ghost in the flurry of disturbed snow. Hydraulics whined as landing feet extended. The craft settled with all the grace of a butterfly, the remaining snow crunching under the weight.

'I don't understand what's wrong with a Stormbird,' said Barzareon, Paladin of the 31st Order. 'That flitter-bug looks like it would be knocked over by a strong breeze.'

'While I am at post as Lord Protector, Lord Guilliman believes that a civilian transport better fits his role,' the Lion replied. As much as he had his doubts about his brother's conviction to prosecute the pursuit of Curze, he would not have his legionaries speak ill of a member of the Imperial Triumvirate. 'It is a noble warrior that is willing to sheathe his sword.'

'Of course, my liege,' said Barzareon.

Guilliman emerged from the open side of the shuttle-flyer, flanked by two legionaries. The first the Lion had come to know well enough, Drakus Gorod, captain of the Invictarus, clad in blue Cataphractus Terminator armour chased with polished white marble and gold. The other was more of an enigma – Valentus Dolor, Tetrarch of Occluda. He was a titan of a warrior, even next to a primarch, his highly ornate plate crafted by the finest artisans, painted in white with trims of blue, a reverse of the standard XIII Legion livery.

'You can see me well enough from there,' Guilliman declared, raising a hand in a gesture to stop. 'You are not part of this.'

Only after a moment did the Lion realise the words were addressed to the grey-armoured warriors skulking at the door to the ornithopter. Space Wolves, on a self-appointed mission to watch Guilliman. For what, exactly, the Lion was no longer sure. The founding of Imperium Secundus had begun. What the VI Legion thought about it had been rendered irrelevant. It was likely that there was another so-called watch-pack scouring the galaxy for him. Tuchulcha's rapid transit through the ruinstorm had put paid to any chance they had of finding the Lion.

If they came across Corswain and the rest of the First Legion, they would get scant indulgence.

'Why are we here, Lord Protector?' Guilliman asked, crossing the muddied snow.

'To see this.'

The Lion waved towards the blocky building two hundred metres further up the slope. It was two storeys high, its ferrocrete foundation jutting out in a solid block from the mountainside. A tall obelisk of girders stretched up from one side of the station, its summit encrusted with vox transmitters and receiver dishes.

'A communications relay station,' said Guilliman, joining the Lion as he started up the slope. They came upon a black-surfaced track that zigzagged up the mountain. They strode across it and up the rock. 'Station Fifty-eight-decline, to be exact. A redundancy system in case of loss of orbital relays.'

'It has been attacked,' said the Lion as they reached the road again and this time followed it to the small doorway in the side of the communications building. 'Contact was lost yesterday, just after midnight.'

Guilliman said nothing as the Lion stopped and looked within, the door being too small to allow him entry with any kind of dignity. Inside, the building was broken into a split-level, the bottom floor filled with purring atomic generators and the communications consoles. Upstairs, on a mezzanine overlooking the machinery, three bunk-cots and a row of lockers accommodated the six-strong work shift.

The station was empty of people, and of any evidence of violence – not a spent casing or las-mark marred the perfectly maintained facility.

He felt Guilliman at his shoulder and moved aside. The primarch of the Ultramarines knelt and stuck his head in.

'Why do you assume an attack?' asked the Lord Warden as he withdrew.

The Lion nodded to Holguin, and the leader of the Deathwing ducked his bulk through the door as carefully as he could. The stairs were made of the same ferrocrete as the foundations and sustained his weight as he took them three at a stride.

'Here,' said Holguin, opening the first of the six lockers.

Inside were the bloodied remains of a woman, clothes in tatters on her lacerated body. Gore matted her hair and streaked her face, which seemed untouched from this distance. She was pinned to the back of the locker with a narrow metal spar.

Holguin opened the other lockers, displaying the three other women and two men of the last shift. All were similarly pierced and displayed, their faces showing no signs of the pain or terror they must have felt.

Saying nothing, Holguin turned the head of the man in the last locker and used a thumb to raise an eyelid. The socket within was empty.

‘They’ve all had their eyes removed,’ the voted lieutenant declared.

‘It has to be Curze,’ the Lion said as Holguin returned.

‘Who found the bodies?’ asked Guilliman. ‘Where is everyone else?’

‘I was here earlier, Lord Guilliman,’ said Holguin. ‘The previous shift-crew have been located and detained, as have the third shift members, due on in three hours. We secured the area when our nuncio alerted us to the control centre’s repeated requests for the station maintenance logs.’

‘Your nuncio-vox intercepted a secure, ciphered transmission?’ Dolor said. ‘By what right are you listening in to the civilian communication stream? And you should have alerted the Praecental Guard before seizing anybody.’

‘Who is “we”?’ Guilliman asked. ‘Who secured the area?’

‘My legionaries,’ the Lion replied. He turned his attention to Dolor. ‘We are listening to civilian communications because it is more likely that we will find the telltale signs of Curze’s presence in their chatter. Civilian operators gossip more, tetrarch. They swap rumours, strange goings-on. Ghost stories. These are the footprints in the snow that will lead us to Curze. It is not my *right* to do so – as Lord Protector, it is my *duty*.’

He shrugged.

‘As for the Praecental Guard, they have already proven themselves incapable of rendering any area secure, even the Fortress of Hera.’

‘A bloody big footprint,’ muttered Gorod.

‘What’s that?’ the Lion demanded, turning the full intensity of his attention towards the fief commander of the Invictus bodyguard. Despite his years and conditioning, Gorod could not help but flinch.

‘Why would Curze leave such obvious evidence?’ Guilliman interceded. ‘You speak of paper-thin trails leading us to him, but claim he has left six corpses on display.’

‘Blinded, in a vox post,’ the Lion pointed out. ‘Do you not think that there is a message there? He is baiting us, be sure of it.’

‘There is another explanation, Lord Protector, Lord Warden,’ ventured Dolor. ‘We are in Illyrium. What the uncouth would call “bandit country”. There are

clans here that have squabbled with each other for millennia. For all we know, these workers were on the wrong side of a retributive strike, or targeted by Illyrian dissenters.'

'You think they were killed because of a highland feud?' said Holguin. 'Eviscerated, blinded and pinned to their lockers by angry neighbours? Without a drop of blood being left elsewhere?'

'These people are barbarians,' added Gorod. 'They do all sorts of bad things to each other. Scare tactics. Could even be a common criminal element. It is not unknown that smugglers sometimes use these stations. Perhaps the crew were uncooperative.'

'Illyrium has always harboured a lawless element,' Guilliman said, his manner apologetic. 'Important information crosses these mountains, the stations give them a mechanical entry point into the network. Theoretically, it is easier for them to crack the ground-based ciphers, manually accessing the signals.'

'Smugglers? Common criminals?' The Lion could not believe what he was hearing and fought to keep in check the biting remarks that crowded towards his tongue. He breathed deep. The cold of the mountain air through flared nostrils cleared his thoughts.

'Possibly anti-Imperial dissidents,' admitted Guilliman. 'There is an equally long and unpleasant history between Illyrium and the civitas.'

'If that is the case then, Curze or not, we have to deal with this,' the Lion insisted.

'It is a matter for the militia, or the Praecental Guard if you wish.' Guilliman laid a hand on the Lion's arm. 'Macragge knows its own. Let us deal with it.'

'Deal with it?' The primarch of the Dark Angels pulled back his arm from his brother's grip. He darted a stare at Holguin, the look commanding the voted lieutenant to withdraw. Guilliman caught his meaning and sent his own retainers away.

'Speak in confidence, brother,' said the Lord Warden.

'It is not good for us to disagree in view of the lesser ranks, brother,' the Lion said, dropping his voice. 'I cannot leave this matter for you to *deal* with. You should have *dealt* with it already, in the years when you were not fighting a civil war. You thought to placate them, didn't you? If you make the Illyrians your friends, they are no longer your enemies?'

'I prefer peaceful diplomacy.'

'That is the luxury of your education. I grew up hunted by monsters in a forest beset by darkness. When a Great Beast marauds, the warriors of the keep do not seek terms with it, they do not ride out and ask for it to accommodate their feelings. They set forth with shocklance and power sword, and all the courage

and determination they can muster. They find the beast and they lay their blades upon it until it is dead, or they are.'

'You are not on Caliban any more,' Guilliman warned, shaking his head. 'These are *people* you speak of, not monsters.'

'One is not,' the Lion assured him. 'One truly is a monster. I will catch him, and lay my blade upon him, and he will trouble us no more. Do you seek to obstruct me?'

Guilliman stepped back, arms crossing his chest. He thought for a moment and shook his head once.

'I will only offer advice and reason, never forceful objection. You are correct, you are within your powers to act as you have and I have no basis to stop you. Remember that excellence in government is not measured by how many powers you take and laws you create, but in how many you do not have to use. A just society does not require such sanction.'

'You always were the reasonable one, Roboute,' said the Lion. 'I am an animal of the forests.'

He turned back to the Stormbird. His next thought went unspoken.

That is why I will always be stronger.

FIFTEEN

Principles

Caliban

Astelan was curious about Luther’s choice of venue to meet Belath. For the most part the Grand Master of the Order conducted his business from his study, from which he had despatched Zahariel and Astelan earlier that day. Cloistering himself away from the public galleries and halls of state gave the impression that Luther was not seeking aggrandisement, a simple administrator tending to the needs of Caliban until the Lion returned.

Instead of that small chamber, Luther had instructed his First Master to bring their arrival to the Hall of Decemial, near to the gates of the Angelicasta. It was barely used except for occasional traditional feast days, on which nominated warriors of the Order were recognised by invitation to sit at the tables and banquet with their officers.

When he entered, Astelan’s questions were immediately answered. The tables had been removed and the benches set aside to form a corridor down the length of the hall. At the far end the great ebon throne of the Lion had been set on a shallow wooden stage. Before it, just to its right-hand side on the stone floor, a much smaller chair was set.

Luther waited in the chair while Chapter Masters and captains filled the benches, straining to see the new arrival.

It was perfect theatre. Had it been the Lion returning, all was set to fete his homecoming. As it was, the scene laid before Belath was one of patient dedication to service, awaiting that majestic return. It was as though Luther always sat on that chair, like a loyal hound missing the foot of his master, pining for the day of reunion.

Astelan stepped across the threshold between the two massive doors, the portal made of wood from ancient trees carved with twin likenesses of the Dark Angel – the winged, monkish figure that some claimed represented the Emperor as he had been clad when he led the First Legion in secret. Astelan doubted that.

Others thought it was the angel of death, and this Astelan could well believe. An incarnation of the nature of the warriors created by the Emperor’s will.

Whatever its meaning, its lineage was from the Legion and not the Order, one of the few Dark Angels trappings that had survived the last seventy years of

gradual maintenance and replacement by Luther's men.

The same was true inside. The banners that hung from the ceiling. The victory honours that adorned the walls. The trophies brought from worlds conquered before Caliban had been discovered.

A Legion space, protected in the heart of the Angelicasta like an insect preserved in amber. A nod towards that allegiance while all around, in the titles and hierarchy, in the oaths and battle doctrine, the Order had essentially returned to replace the Dark Angels.

Its presence brought another realisation. The masquerade perpetrated by the arrangement of the hall had been long considered. Long enough, in fact, that Luther had ensured that the door itself remained as a mask in Legion tradition so that any that approached would think nothing had changed. It was the seed from which the Legion could be reborn if necessary, the last vestige of fealty to Terra and its superhuman son installed as ruler of Caliban.

It reminded Astelan that Luther had been expecting the return of the primarch for a long time. How would such a wait prey upon the nerves and ambitions of a man?

Belath entered next, announced loudly by Astelan. He came to an abrupt halt as the occupants of the benches rose to their feet with a cheer and applauded. He looked left and right, his expression warring between confusion and delight.

Zahariel lingered beyond the door, and had said nothing for the remainder of the journey into the Angelicasta. He stayed several paces back as Astelan gestured for Belath to continue, escorting the Chapter Master from just a stride behind.

Luther rose from his seat and held up his arms for quiet. The seemingly spontaneous outpouring of appreciation for the Lion's returning noble son died away.

'We offer gratitude and tribute to our returning hero!' the Grand Master declared. 'Too long have we been bereft of the company of our brothers that set abroad upon the Emperor's Crusade. Now brought back to us, let us listen keenly to the tales of war he brings, and laud his triumphs!'

There was another roar of approval and burst of applause, which hastened Belath's stride. By the time he had reached Luther at the far end of the hall the Chapter Master looked exceptionally ill at ease. Astelan watched him closely, enjoying Belath's discomfort. The greater the outpouring of praise, the more Belath shrank back from it.

'Master Luther,' Belath said over the din, 'I had hoped my arrival would not be conspicuous. I communicated as much.'

'You must forgive the enthusiasm of your brothers,' Luther replied, signalling for the audience to fall silent again. When they had done so, he continued. 'We

have been forced to share only vicariously in the deeds of the Legion, and wished to honour you.'

'I have news that is to be passed to your ear alone,' Belath said in a low voice. 'Grave tidings of a galaxy at war.'

'I see.' The Grand Master's smile was replaced with a solemn look. He turned his attention to the gathered officers. 'Our brother is quite overwhelmed by your appreciation, lords of Caliban. We will feast his return in proper fashion and in due course, but for the moment please return to your duties. And remember, do not let your warriors fall to gossip and idle chatter. Announcements will be forthcoming, but in the meantime they are not to be distracted from their training and the work at hand.'

As the legionaries filed away, one from their group detached from the parting mass – Lord Cypher. Luther sat down again as the Guardian of the Order stood at his left shoulder. No word had been given but Luther did not spare his advisor a second glance.

'Zahariel, Astelan,' he called as they turned to depart. 'I require your attendance for a while longer.'

'My instruction was to deliver my message to you alone, Lord Luther,' said Belath, darting an angry look at Zahariel in particular.

'This is my command circle, my trusted lieutenants. There is nothing you will tell me that I would not have them hear, so let us not waste time by making me your herald.'

'No offence was intended, Master Luther,' Belath said hurriedly.

'None was taken, it is simply a matter of expediency, brother,' Luther said cordially. His tone changed in an instant, eyes narrowing. 'Does the Lion still live?'

To Astelan's surprise, and that of Luther judging by his expression, Belath did not have a ready answer. He swallowed hard and looked away for a moment.

'We believe so.'

'Believe?' Luther leaned forward on the arms of his chair. 'Who believes what?'

'What do you know already?' Belath asked, again avoiding a direct answer as he had earlier. 'Of Horus and the rebellion?'

'Little enough,' Luther admitted with a frown. 'Hearsay, rumour. Horus and his sons have turned against the Emperor and some of the other Legions also. We have heard nothing solid since the warp storms engulfed us, just little morsels gleaned from those that came unbidden to our domain, but I assume that they are related?'

'Of that I can't say definitively, but it can't be coincidence. It is not just Caliban that is isolated, the warp is in turmoil the length and breadth of the

galaxy. How it answers to the command of Horus… The truth is…' Belath shook his head. 'There is very little truth to be told these days. I will tell you only of what I have been told by Corswain or have witnessed myself.'

'Corswain?' Lord Cypher stepped closer. 'The name sounds familiar, but I cannot place it.'

'A Captain-Paladin,' said Luther. 'I met him briefly when our ships were taken by the Ninth Order at Zaramund. A fine young warrior, very promising. An excellent bladesman.'

'Not Paladin any longer. He is the Lion's seneschal now.'

'My replacement?' Luther's brow furrowed deeper and he drew in his cheeks. After a moment, he relaxed and nodded. 'It was inevitable, I suppose, that the Lion would need a second in my absence.'

'More than that, it has transpired,' said Belath. He stepped from side to side, gathering his thoughts. His gaze swept across the other Space Marines. 'The situation is dire. Horus planned his rebellion well. The Salamanders and Raven Guard are all but destroyed. The Iron Hands… The Gorgon is dead, slain by the blade of Fulgrim. The Night Lords, the Word Bearers, the World Eaters, they have all sided with the traitor. The Iron Warriors also.'

Luther swallowed hard, Zahariel's frown deepened. It was almost impossible to envisage, to think that perhaps the Imperium had collapsed. More than ever Caliban and those on the world needed to look to their own efforts and fortunes.

'The Lion,' said Astelan. This was startling news but he could barely contain his impatience. 'What of the Lion?'

'We fought the Night Lords, in the sectors around Thramas. The Lion and the Night Haunter almost killed each other.' Belath grimaced at the thought. 'Too much to say, so many battles and dead brothers. We caught the Night Lords in one final ambush. And then the Lion had to leave.'

'Leave?' This time it was Luther who could not suppress his agitation, sliding to the front of his chair. 'Leave what?'

'Corswain told me that the primarch had received news from the east, beyond the storms. Guilliman gathered all his strength to Ultramar. For all we know, Terra has fallen to Horus, the Emperor dead by His son's hand. So some believe, Guilliman included it seems.'

'You make no sense, Belath,' said Lord Cypher. 'Speak plainly of what happened.'

'The Lion departed, splitting the Legion.' Belath sighed at the recollection. 'He abandoned thoughts of saving Terra to bring Guilliman back to the righteous path. He left Corswain in charge, but we fared badly, fighting against elements of the Death Guard.'

'Mortarion has turned as well?'

‘I cannot confirm that. Our foe was Calas Typhon. He still wars against Corswain and thirty thousand brothers, or did so when we left.’

Luther seemed more intrigued than surprised by this announcement. Belath continued, oblivious to the Grand Master’s reaction.

‘Corswain despatched me with transports to bring more warriors to the campaign. Twenty transports, each large enough to carry fifteen hundred warriors.’

‘Thirty thousand Space Marines.’ Astelan nodded in appreciation. ‘That would swing any war in your favour.’

‘*Our* favour,’ added Lord Cypher, a little too quickly perhaps. Belath looked strangely at Astelan.

‘The recruits are ready, yes? You have been training and arming as the Lion instructed?’

‘A mighty host stands ready,’ said Luther.

‘You seem reluctant, Master Luther,’ said Belath. ‘Is there a problem?’

‘I hope not,’ replied the Grand Master. He stood up, forcing the Chapter Master back a step. He did not speak for several seconds, seeming reluctant to say what was on his mind, his eyes roaming across the banners and trophies as if seeking inspiration. ‘I want to believe you, Belath, I really do.’

‘I don’t understand.’ The new arrival looked at Astelan first, and quickly realised he would gain no support from that quarter. His gaze moved to Lord Cypher. ‘You have known me since I first took up a bolter. Why do you hold your tongue?’

Lord Cypher said nothing and it was left to Astelan to give voice to the thought that vexed Luther.

‘You are probably telling the truth, Belath. At least some of it. Horus and many others have turned. The First Legion might well be divided. How are we to know who holds your allegiance? What guarantee can you offer that the troops we despatch will not be led into a trap and annihilated, or worse?’

‘Worse?’ said Luther.

‘Turned,’ Astelan said quietly. ‘I do not know how many were lured from the Emperor by Horus, but it is no small number evidently. Some promises might sway even a son of Caliban to a new cause.’

‘This is preposterous.’ Belath rounded on Astelan, jabbing an accusing finger. ‘You seek to settle an old grievance at the expense of the Legion!’

‘Do I not have cause for grievance, Belath?’ said Astelan, recalling events several decades earlier. ‘Was it not you that reported to the Lion that I had failed to control the situation at Byzanthis? You blamed me for your own bloody meddling and the Lion was only too willing to listen.’

‘You question my loyalty, Merir Astelan?’ The words were spat through gritted teeth. ‘Your insubordination was no secret even before I was tasked with monitoring you.’

‘We know how loyalty to the Lion is rewarded, don’t we?’ snarled Astelan, directing the comment towards Zahariel. ‘I would ask Brother Nemiel, but he cannot answer.’

‘Astelan is right,’ said the Master of the Mystai. ‘There is nothing we can trust beyond the walls of Aldurukh. Old oaths are meaningless in this new reality. The Lion may have allied with Guilliman and abandoned Terra and us, or he may return at the head of Horus’ armies. We can be sure of nothing.’

‘You can be sure of Corswain!’ Belath declared, gasping the words as a drowning man snatches down lungfuls of air. ‘Do any of you doubt his heart and loyalty?’

Silence answered the question.

‘There is only one way to be sure.’ Luther spoke quietly, the echo of argument fading down the massive hall. The Grand Master gestured towards Zahariel and then looked at Belath. ‘We can, at least, determine what you believe is the truth. If you are willing?’

Belath looked with disgust at the former Librarian, doubtless recalling his earlier brutal intrusion into the Chapter Master’s thoughts. Returning his attention to Luther he saw no compromise or room for appeal in the Grand Master’s stare. Lip curling with disdain, Belath nodded his acquiescence.

‘This is an outrage,’ he whispered. ‘The honour of you all is stained by this act, but mine will remain pure. Do what you must, mind-thief.’

Zahariel looked to Luther for confirmation and received a nod of affirmation. This time he did not lay hands on Belath, but simply stared at him, the pupils of his eyes glowing bright gold.

‘Think of Corswain,’ the Master of the Mystai instructed. ‘Of your purpose in coming here.’

Belath met the psyker’s gaze and for a moment the face of Zahariel was reflected in his eyes. The Chapter Master’s facial muscles relaxed and his look became glazed for a few seconds.

Far sooner than Astelan expected, Zahariel closed his eyes, the golden shimmer beneath them quickly dimming. When he opened them again they had taken on their normal hue.

‘All that he has told us is true,’ Zahariel said. ‘The war with the Night Lords, the Lion’s departure, Corswain’s campaign against Calas Typhon. The transports came hence from Terra Nullius, a world that has chosen neither the Emperor nor the Warmaster as ruler.’

This last piece of information had been gleaned almost by accident, but it was reassuring to learn of the existence of another world seeking to distance itself from the two sides of the storm engulfing the galaxy.

There was something else, but Zahariel caught himself before saying it. Instead the Master of the Mystai took a step back, bowing his head.

‘Satisfied?’ spat Belath, glaring at Luther. ‘Any fresh humiliation you wish to heap upon me?’

‘I must offer my humblest, deepest apologies,’ replied the Grand Master. He sank to one knee before Belath, bowing his head in contrition as a neophyte might make atonement to his sergeant-at-arms. He glanced sidelong at Lord Cypher and Astelan, the look unseen from where Belath stood over Luther. ‘If the Lion has passed his authority to Corswain, then we shall heed the word of the seneschal as though it were that of the primarch himself.’

Astelan latched quickly to the Grand Master’s approach.

‘I shall begin the mustering of the troops, Chapter Master,’ he said, fist raised to his chest in salute. ‘We are honoured to rejoin the Legion at long last.’

‘You are mistaken,’ said Belath. He laid a hand on Luther’s shoulder, a gesture of forgiveness. The Chapter Master said nothing until Luther was standing again. ‘Corswain does not rescind the orders of the Lion. The recruits will leave under my command. The stewardship of Caliban remains your duty to bear, Master Luther.’

‘Of course it does,’ the Grand Master said without hesitation. He half turned to the great doors and held a hand out towards them. ‘Quarters have been assigned for you.’

‘That will also not be necessary. I will return to my ship to ensure all is in order to receive the troops.’

‘I will escort…’ Astelan began, but fell silent at a look from Luther.

‘Belath is capable of finding transportation back to his gunship,’ said the Grand Master. ‘We have intruded on his time enough for now.’

‘As you command. I will await communication from the fleet, Master Belath.’

Belath said nothing, giving each of them a sour look as he departed. They watched until the double doors closed behind him.

‘We have to kill him,’ Astelan said quickly.

Zahariel barely noticed the Chapter Master’s departure, wrapped up in his own thoughts. Astelan’s remark brought him back to the present.

‘Why?’ said the Master of the Mystai.

‘A harsh judgement, First Master,’ said Lord Cypher. ‘You are swift to order execution for little reason.’

‘Belath was correct, First Master,’ Zahariel said. ‘You are letting your hate skew your judgement.’

‘An interesting analysis coming from one that only an hour ago was trying to rip the man’s mind from his brain,’ Astelan replied with a derisive snort. ‘Why are you so keen to see him live?’

‘Nobody is to be killed.’ Luther’s hand cut the air with a chopping motion as his words cut the argument. The Grand Master frowned at Astelan and Zahariel before he sat down, forcing the others to wait in silence while he gathered his thoughts. ‘They are our battle-brothers. The ships are in orbit and we are down here. Belath is our only conduit for the moment. He will have a company of warriors with him at most, enough to command his flotilla, but no more will have been spared the fighting by Corswain. After recent expansions, we have enough space in the dungeons for a few more internees, do we not?’

‘Certainly,’ said Lord Cypher. ‘We must also bear in mind that Belath and most of his companions are from Caliban. They may not be opposed to our aims.’

‘And what are your aims, exactly?’ asked Astelan.

‘We might ask the same of you,’ countered Lord Cypher.

‘*Our* aim is clear,’ declared Luther. ‘ We seek to secure the safety and future of Caliban and the Order.’

‘And you think that parting from the Imperium is the way to achieve that?’ said the First Master. He shook his head. ‘What do you think a single world can do against a galaxy of foes?’

‘The Imperium has already ended,’ said Luther. ‘Belath’s words confirmed our suspicions. Even if the Emperor still lives and rules, Horus wages war on the Imperium. It has broken from within. We cannot choose a side, unless we are certain that it will be victorious. Tell me, First Master, can you guarantee that the Emperor will be victorious? You cannot, no more than we can count upon Horus to prevail in this struggle.’

‘Both sides are likely to exhaust themselves,’ Lord Cypher added, stepping back to his customary position at Luther’s left shoulder. ‘The Grand Master is correct, Caliban must be strong enough alone. Borrowed power is no power at all.’

‘If we send away thirty thousand warriors, we have less than half that number left to defend the system,’ Astelan pointed out. ‘We cannot possibly comply with Corswain’s demand and retain the force of arms needed to defend this world.’

Astelan was about to continue but there was something Zahariel had to confirm for himself. He held up a hand and the First Master paused to allow Zahariel to speak.

‘It is important that we all understand one thing, and are united by this purpose even if our opinions differ on other matters,’ said the psyker. ‘Is there any among us not willing to break our oaths to the Lion? Are we of single mind that the primarch does not deserve our allegiance?’

The question hung in the air for a few seconds. Astelan was the first to answer it.

‘Need I really say it out loud again? I owe the Lion nothing.’

‘We each have been wronged by him that we thought our greatest brother,’ Luther said slowly. ‘Either directly or by his absence, his undue chastisement has been laid upon us all. I would say also this, and this is just as important, we cannot be Dark Angels any longer. They are a weapon of Terra, the sons of the Lion.’

‘The Order has been restored in all but name, what difference does it make?’ said Astelan.

‘A great difference,’ answered Lord Cypher. ‘The Order stands alone. If we are not Dark Angels, they are outsiders. Enemies.’

These words dragged heavily at Zahariel’s thoughts. It was one thing to turn his back on the Lion, who had banished him from the Great Crusade and slain his cousin. It was another matter to reject the Legion that had taught him how to harness his powers, turned him into the warrior he was.

Then he remembered Caliban’s soul, denied and chained by those same doctrines and dogma. To serve this higher purpose Zahariel had to be free of all other loyalties. Foremost amongst his thoughts had to be the preservation of Caliban and the liberation of the force contained within the planet’s core. The Dark Angels had no part in such a task.

‘I am the Master of the Mystai, servant of the Order,’ Zahariel declared. He raised a fist. ‘You are the Grand Master.’

Lord Cypher silently followed suit. Luther stood and did the same. All eyes turned to Astelan. The Terran looked at each of them for a while, the outsider. He smiled as he lifted his fist in salute.

‘I have served many masters under many names. Above all, I am an Angel of Death. Now I wear the mantle of First Master of the Order. Subject to your command, Sar Luther.’

They all accepted this occasion in thoughtful silence, their salutes to each other saying more than words could convey. Eventually Luther lowered his fist and sat down.

‘Whether the war goes for the Emperor or against, these storms in the warp will not last forever. Preparations need to be made, precautions and measures taken.’

‘The path you have chosen may bring allies, but few friends,’ warned Astelan. ‘It will certainly make enemies. The thing you seek, the protection of Caliban, must be greater than any other consideration. *Any* other consideration, Grand Master. Are you willing to do whatever is needed?’

It was clear what the First Master was implying. Luther said nothing, but Lord Cypher spoke quietly, barely heard from beneath his hood.

‘Whoever wins the war, they will come. In seeking independence from both, we bring jeopardy to that which we desire – the protection of Caliban.’

‘Caliban must be free,’ Zahariel replied. ‘The protection offered by subservience to others is an illusion, walls not to deter invaders, but to keep prisoners within.’

Luther broke his silence eventually, his eyes staring into the distance, his words calm but firm.

‘I more fear what is within me, than what comes from without. But if my principles are righteous, any action that stems from them must be virtuous.’

The key slid effortlessly into its lock with a satisfying metallic click, perfectly matched even centuries after both had been made. The lock itself, and the door within which it sat, were only visible to Zahariel’s second sight – any ungifted resident of the Angelicasta would pass by the unremarkable stretch of wood-panelled wall without pause.

Already assured by his psychic sense that no such interloper was near enough to witness the act, the Master of the Mystai pushed at the wood with a gloved hand, the door opening silently on beautifully counterweighted hinges.

The precision that had gone into the construction of the chamber was something that gave him a profound sense of pleasure. It told him of a mind that had, by necessity, paid attention to the most minor details. Its designer had been aware of the consequences of even the slightest deviation from strictly defined parameters of safety and acceptance.

The mind of a psyker.

The rest of the Mystai followed Zahariel into the chamber, padding on slippered feet. The floor was a single mass of granite, nearly black. Inset were golden symbols and hexagrammatic polygonal patterns. The walls were marble, covered with a tracery of lead in convoluted warding shapes.

The Mystai took up position at the cardinal points of the hexagram, one at every other line of the star, Zahariel at their centre.

To Zahariel’s awakened senses, the spirit of Caliban lapped at the psychic defences, held at bay as a sea resisted by a cliff. Above, as though the chamber had been opened to the sky by the sigils on the floor, the warp roiled and burned, the storm that had beset it raging in a tempest. Never the two should meet, such was the intent and design of the room.

A place of sanctuary, where the Mystai could study and practise and grow their powers, watching the warp, tapping into its energies without the pull of Caliban.

Without the call of the Ouroboros singing in their ears.

Zahariel could hear it, a delicate song of life and beauty, touched with the melancholy of isolation and loneliness. An autumn song, fearing the coming of winter, remembering the long days of summer.

This chamber was a gathering place, not for psykers, but for power. The sigils channelled and refined the warp energy seeping through the room. With Caliban's hunger held at bay it could be tapped without the two energies ever conjoining.

For an age Caliban had craved this connection. The Ouroboros had spent an immortal life seeking reunion with the realm from which it had been stolen. The secret had been here all along, hidden behind walls of stone and symbols of lead. A vault, impenetrable from the outside.

Zahariel opened his mind, letting free the piece of the Ouroboros he had brought with him.

Spring would come to Caliban again.

Like a seed, the psychic remnant took root, spreading out into the minds of the other Mystai. They resisted at first, as had Zahariel. Human fear, primal and unbreakable, lashed out. But the Ouroboros fed on the warp, drinking deep of the power denied it for so long. Defences erected by the crude catechisms of Israfael and his ilk were no match for the will of Caliban.

Swiftly, one after the other, the Mystai let in the power of Caliban, opening eyes and thoughts to the majesty of their world. There was a brief flicker of resistance, an unconscious reflex from Vassago.

Growing within the barrier, the Ouroboros exerted its power. The lead on the walls started to melt, running from the etched channels, the tracery of barrier runes evaporating as psychic force assailed it within and without.

As the cliff must eventually crash down under the constant gnawing of the sea, so the warding symbols failed, the wash of Caliban's power flowing into the breach.

Zahariel laughed as the energy infused his body. His disciples laughed with him.

'Brothers,' he told them, opening eyes that shone with emerald green light. 'Now you share my vision, my purpose.'

'The will of Caliban be done,' they replied.

SIXTEEN

Locking the stable gate

Ultramar

There was a scale model of Magna Macragge Civitas in the eastern hall of the residency, which the Lion found altogether more pleasant than the hololithic projections of the city held in the databanks of the *Invincible Reason*. The tactile quality of being able to crouch down and look across the perfectly represented escarpment of Gallan's Rock, or to see down from the spired roofs of the Palaestra, made up for the lack of convenience to do so. In seeing the physical object, he was reminded just what thought had gone into the layout, a sense he never had picked up from projected light.

'It's very orderly,' he said, glancing up from the stacks of the granaries to look at his brothers. Sanguinius stood to one side, not so much distracted as almost absent in thought. Guilliman frowned.

'The domus is a mess, but I took my father's advice and decided never to spend time organising that which actively resisted organisation. There is something to be said in the defence of allowing organic growth. Often the wisdom of the crowd concocts solutions far more elegantly than any application of the theoretical and practical.'

'People best make their own spaces,' said the Lion.

'That is a more succinct way of saying it, yes,' Guilliman admitted. 'I suppose Aldurukh is not so different? It follows the established Imperial delineations and zonal layouts?'

'Beyond the walls, we endeavoured to match the Imperium's standards. The city proper is more like the castrum, defined by defensive needs and geology more than grand design.' He looked at the inner fortification of the civitas and shook his head. 'Although Aldurukh has a great deal more… verticality.'

Guilliman questioned the use of this word with a look.

'It's mostly dug out of a mountain,' explained the Lion. 'Not many flat spaces around the tower of the Angelicasta until you reach the plain. It is generally based on a spiral layout, moving in towards the central keep from the outer gates.'

Guilliman accepted this with a nod and said nothing. He glanced at Sanguinius but the emperor was staring through the modelled city, his thoughts far away.

‘Brother, I do not think you are fully engaged in our endeavour,’ said the Lion, straightening. ‘You have barely spoken your approval of my plan.’

‘Whatever you and Roboute decide will be exceptional,’ said the Blood Angel, a semblance of life returning to his features like a beautiful statue animating. He smiled, but it did not reach his eyes. ‘It would be a grand vanity to think I can improve on a design described by two such towering intellects.’

‘I will be transmitting my orders before daybreak,’ the Lion said, looking directly at Guilliman. ‘Now is the time to voice any objections. We must be of one mind on this matter.’

The Lord Warden did not return his gaze, but spent some seconds studying the scaled-down city. How different a reaction from the last time the Lion’s warriors had come to Macragge Civitas. Four hundred drop pods had descended towards the fully active defences, certain death for those within. It had been the Lion’s wariness that had prepared the planetstrike, but the actions of Curze to launch it.

Even so, he could not forget that one simple miscalculation had almost ended everything before it had started. Had Guilliman not listened, had he allowed thousands of Dark Angels to die in the skies above Macragge Civitas, the shaky trust that existed between them would have faltered in seconds. Put simply, Imperium Secundus would have died on that day along with many sons of Caliban and Macragge.

It did not help the Lion to think that the future of his creation had been Guilliman’s first concern in all likelihood – the lives of Dark Angels a distant secondary consideration.

The Lion felt the gaze of the Ultramarines primarch on him again, steady but passive, scrutinising without judgement. It was not like his brother to hold a grudge, or relish another’s discomfort, but the Lion could not forget the humiliation he had felt, on the verge of begging for the lives of his Space Marines.

‘No objections, brother,’ Guilliman assured him. ‘I trust you will treat my world as your own.’

Unsure whether there was a veiled accusation in the remark or simply a pang of his own guilt making his gut tighten, the Lion stifled a barbed reply. It was a regret that he had never returned to Caliban after joining the Great Crusade, but there had been so much to do and so little of it would have been achieved away from the fighting.

In truth Caliban brought out mixed feelings in him, of estrangement and belonging at the same time. There were two Calibans, one the dark forests and the other the cities of the Imperium. He was not sure that he belonged wholly to either, and it had been so much easier to concentrate on conquest after conquest, leaving the domestic concerns to others far more capable.

‘It was a joke,’ said Guilliman, ‘not a difficult philosophical proposition.’

The Lion realised he had been caught in a public moment of introspection and responded out of instinct, withdrawing into himself.

‘Be sure the orbital screen is down,’ he said and stalked from the hall.

Though he never once regretted his superhuman physique in battle, Guilliman was aware of the limitations it posed in everyday life. By its nature his giant form quelled dissent and required special treatment. It was hard to build an empire based on equality and opportunity when one had been equipped by design with a body that would not fit into most normal dwellings. It had the added disadvantage that any room fitted for the comfort of a primarch by its very nature dwarfed and humbled any visitor, even the largest of Space Marines.

The Ultramarines primarch was reminded of that as he watched Tetrarch Valentus Dolor standing beside the chairs arranged on the other side of the Lord Warden’s desk. The huge piece of granite furniture could have served as a stage had it not been crowded with piles of data-slates and papers, arranged and ordered as neatly as the blocks and streets of the civitas. Dolor rarely sat in the presence of his lord. Even so, he looked somewhat like a rowdy pupil brought before the principal tutor, looking over the broad desk of his master.

‘All shipments have been grounded, lord,’ the tetrarch began. ‘*All* shipments, including those of Legion personnel and materiel. The Dark Angels are visually inspecting every shuttle, cargo hauler, lighter and barge entering or leaving the capital. It is causing chaos.’

‘And how have we facilitated their inspections?’

‘Lord?’

Guilliman leaned forward, the huge desk beneath his elbows creaking in protest. He moved aside a sheaf of papers held down by a gilded ork skull and tapped a hand on the polished stone.

‘What assistance or assurances have you offered to our cousins in the First? Have you prioritised military shipments through our docks? Have you called together the guildmasters and told them to expect delays? Have you asked the teamsters to downshift their loading until the backlog has been cleared?’

Dolor opened his mouth and then closed it again without reply.

‘You recall that I offered full cooperation with the Lion and his sons. They have been granted authority to oversee and secure all transit in and out of the capital. Cooperation means accommodating their needs, not simply a lack of interference.’

‘There is something more sinister, lord,’ Dolor added, perhaps feeling he had lost face in bringing the previous issue to light.

‘Sinister?’

‘The First have sent garrison squads onto the orbital defence platforms.’

‘As I expected they would.’

‘One in three are repositioning as we speak. They are turning their weapons surfacewards.’

‘I see.’ Guilliman leaned back. It made sense, from the point of view of the Lion. ‘I am sure it is as much to repurpose their targeting arrays as it is their weapon systems. The defence platforms have high-powered surveillance capabilities if employed in the correct way. A different practical application guided by a new theoretical.’

‘Which theoretical is that, lord? To open fire on our own people?’

‘A rogue primarch loose on the surface of Macragge.’ Guilliman knew that his brightest and best officers were no fools, but their tribal reaction to the handover of security to the Lion was starting to become repetitive. ‘No matter what we think of the Lion’s methods, remember that Curze remains on our world. The threat to the new emperor is obvious, but bear in mind always that Curze is an indiscriminate murderer. Our warriors, the people of Macragge, are all at risk while he remains at large.’

The primarch stood up, his chair scraping across the bare floor.

‘Our duty is to the people of the Imperium. Keep fixed upon that higher goal. Do not let pride, or Legion loyalty that would be admirable in any other situation, cloud the issue for you, Valentus. In all matters military, for the time being you answer to the Lion. Pass that word to the rest of my sons.’

‘As you command, lord,’ Dolor said with a bow. He hesitated, not yet wishing to leave.

‘What else?’ Guilliman asked, marshalling his patience as he expected some other complaint.

‘The lady Euten sends her regards.’

He had not spoken to her since the Lion’s public declaration of Legatus Militant, assuming jurisdiction over Macragge. ‘Is that all? Any specific message?’

‘None, lord, that she passed to me. She simply asked that you be informed that you are in her thoughts.’

‘Thank you, Valentus. Is there anything else?’

‘No, lord. Master Prayto is waiting outside.’

‘I’ll see him next. Send him in when you depart, Valentus.’

Guilliman turned his back as Dolor left, to look out through the high-arched window behind his desk. From this vantage point he could see across the sprawling estates of the domus all the way to the Gulf of Lycum, past the castle of the Mechanicum, and as far as the Martial Square and the landing fields that dominated the southern expanse of Macragge Civitas.

He pondered the metaphorical import of not being able to see the great bastion of the Octagon Fortress from the office of the Lord Warden, and listened to the approach of Titus Prayto across the polished boards of Illyrian ash heartwood.

The Librarian paced quickly, strides shorter than usual. A sign of agitation. Guilliman could hear the slightly raised pulse of his hearts even past the whine of war-plate muscle fibres. The crackle of transparchment rolled in a fist and the slap of his leatherbound scabbard against thigh plate acted as an echo to the heavy footfalls.

Prayto stopped at the desk with the slightest clearing of his throat.

'What complaint against the Dark Angels do you bring me, centurion?' Guilliman asked without turning.

Prayto hesitated, caught off guard by his master's manner.

'You will not be the first,' the Lord Warden assured him, 'so speak plainly.'

'I have received word that the Lion has unleashed his Librarius upon the castrum, lord.'

'Unleashed? A word heavy with emotion, Titus.' Guilliman faced his subordinate and held out his hand for the parchment leaf. The Librarian handed it over with a grimace.

'They have started to mind-scan all personnel,' Prayto explained, even as Guilliman read the same from the document. 'Their leader, an unshaven brute called Myrdun, is demanding that we hand over our keys to the Red Basilica.'

'The tower of the astropaths? Did he explain why?'

'All communication, mundane or psychic, is to be monitored by the Librarius of the First Legion. As if we need the Red Basilica!'

'So you are more insulted by the intimation against your puissance than the loss of privilege?'

'No, lord,' Prayto recovered quickly. 'My brothers of the Librarius are a safeguard against the Astra Telepathica failing or falling, ready to take up their duties in the event of attack. We are a redundancy for them.'

'But you just said that you do not need the Red Basilica to transmit psychically,' Guilliman replied softly.

'What if we need to broadcast further than the system, to the other parts of the Five Hundred Worlds? The Pharos has become… intermittent. Unreliable for important communication. Since the betrayal of Lorgar, you have insisted that we monitor all astrotelepathy, my lord. If we are to break the Edict of Nikaea it is to bolster the strength of the astropaths against the wiles of the traitors.'

'Are the Librarians of the First somehow deficient, centurion? Is there a reason why the safeguarding of the psychic communion cannot be conducted by Myrdun and his brethren?'

Prayto's silence verged on the sullen for a moment, but he quickly detected his lord's worsening mood and spoke up.

'No, Lord Warden. Myrdun presented me with accreditations of the highest calibre and vouches the same for his Librarius.' He had honour enough at that moment to hang his head in shame. 'My deepest apologies, lord, for allowing my feelings to obscure clear thinking on this occasion. The halfwit thinks himself a sage, but the sage knows himself to be a halfwit.'

'It is far easier for me to instruct twenty in correct ways, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching,' Guilliman replied. 'You have been reading more Shakespire. I am glad you found it agreeable.'

'On a level, lord, though prone to indulgence.' Prayto bowed. 'And I have taken yours too long, Lord Warden. I will convey to my brothers that they will comply with all of Master Myrdun's instructions, as will I.'

Guilliman smoothed the rolled transparchment on his desk as Prayto departed, glad to see no one else waiting when the door opened. He placed the Librarius communiqué on a pile close to the nearest edge of the desk. It was quite a large stack, and beside it was a digi-slate containing another fifty-eight reports. All of them were grievances, official or subtle, raised against the Dark Angels in the twenty hours since the Lion had declared the Legatus Militant.

He hoped that they were making headway with security and finding Curze, because they were certainly not making allies or winning friends.

'Though this be psychosis,' he muttered as he returned to his work, quoting one of his favourite lines of Shakespire, 'there yet is a process to it.'

Lines of black armour snaked out from the landing fields fronting the civitas. Some were formed of vehicles – from humble, ubiquitous Rhinos to broad-sided Mastodons and super-heavy Portcullis monotracks bearing energy shield generators unique to the Dark Angels. Other columns were formed of hundreds of legionaries on foot, stepping out smartly beneath banners and pennants, their war-plate polished to a gleam as though they were on drill rather than occupying the capital of the new Imperium. Swordstrike interceptors cut across the sky like daggers thrown by gods, their knife-blade silhouettes dark against the cloud. Even the air belonged to the Lion's sons.

Holguin had been amongst the first wave to land from the *Architect of History*. He had been given a singular task by the Lion, who had impressed upon the Deathbringer that nobody – not even Lords Guilliman and Sanguinius – was to contradict his orders. He was reluctant to go about that task, and made time to speak to his officers before he left for the Fortress of Hera.

'Nemeres, make sure that you use the Land Speeders to patrol the harbour area too. The domus is a maze, there's no point us going in there, we'll leave it to the

locals. Every route in and out must be secured, though. Heightened vox protocols, random visual checks by gunship.'

Captain Nemeres nodded his acceptance of these orders, having been given them twice already. Holguin tested the patience of his subordinates further, glad of the distracting detail.

'We need reinforced barriers at the entrances to the Avenue of Heroes, and I want stop-breaks manned by a squad every hundred metres along the Via Decmanus Maximus. The Milion will be guarded by Casaellis' Terminators with Land Raider support. First contact and reports will go through the command station at the Octagon Fortress. It's being reciphered by Paladin Warras as we speak – new channel data will be issued by him before dusk.'

'As you command, Deathbringer,' they replied, doubtless wishing him to stop and leave them to their duties.

'One other thing, brothers,' he said, sensing they were about to depart. 'We are in the home of the Ultramarines and we should extend them all honour and courtesy, but nothing more. We are the Legion *de primus* and if one of their officers wants to take issue, brook no dissent. We act by the will and the authority of the Lion, the Lord Protector of the Imperium.'

This cheered them a little and the warriors lifted their fists to their chests in salute before scattering to their various command squads. This left Holguin alone, but for the thirty warriors of the Secta Mortis. His personal guard waited close at hand, their gilded helms marking them out amongst the black of the other Deathwing brethren. Morphael, Carolingus and Athoris – Holguin's successors, one of whom would take command if he was rendered incapable – were amongst them, each marked with an inverted heart-shaped besagew upon their left pauldrons. Athoris noticed his look and approached, a Terran-forged jezzailli couched under his arm, the blue gleam of its plasma chamber lighting his dark armour.

'Our duty awaits, Brother-Deathbringer.'

'Very well, let us be about it,' replied Holguin.

Athoris signalled the others. They split into three, two of the squads heading for Land Raiders parked by the great starport gate. The third squad waited until Holguin set off for *Galatine*. Based on the hull of a Land Raider, the personal transport of the Deathbringer was, as far as Holguin knew, a unique design of Caliban, replacing tracks with a powerful anti-gravitic generator. As armoured as one of the mobile bunkers of his companions, *Galatine* was capable of far greater speeds, taking him to the forefront of the fighting wherever that might be.

Holguin strode up the ramp and took his place just behind the pilot's compartment while the others seated themselves along the benches in the cramped transport area. When all were ready, he signalled for the Secta Mortis to

move off, *Galatine* leading the way onto the Via Hera, past the memorial gardens and through the Porta Hera.

They passed through the wall and into the castrum, before turning west towards the Fortress of Hera proper. He let out a breath, not realising he had been holding it, expecting someone to attempt to halt their incursion into the very heart of the XIII Legion's domain. The transports drew up at the steps to the Praetorium and Holguin disembarked, leaving the gunners and three legionaries to stand watch under the command of Master Dyrnwyn. Committed now, he wasted no time leading the rest up into the Praetorium.

They encountered a few serfs, scattering from the path of the determined advance of the Dark Angels veterans. Holguin had already memorised the layout and turned left and then right, heading directly for the council chambers now repurposed as a fresh audience hall for the Emperor Sanguinius. Where the Council Militis had once sat, now the Imperial Triumvirate held their court, surrounded by the guard rooms and barracks of the former elite of Macragge. It was a fortress within a fortress, almost as secure as the Angelicasta of Aldurukh.

The audience hall itself was reached only through a series of antechambers like locks on a canal, ascending towards the slope of the Hera's Crown mountains. Each antechamber was separated by a broad corridor lined with murder holes and energy barrier generators – a killing field almost impossible to negotiate.

Still none sought to bar their passage, the Ultramarines manning the posts silent as the black-clad First Legion swept imperiously into the last assembly hall.

It was full of Space Marines in the livery of several Legions. Holguin ordered his men to stand fast as he spied Drakus Gorod across the antechamber. The Captain of the Invictus bodyguard saw him and the two met halfway across the tiled floor.

'I am here on the orders of the Lord Protector of the Imperium,' Holguin announced grandly, drawing his greatsword, the tip rounded in the style of the Windmir reavers from whom he was descended. 'The Lion of Caliban, primarch of the First Legion, declares Legatus Militant. All authority for the security and close protection of the Imperial Triumvirate and the environs of the Fortress of Hera reside in me and my officers. None shall pass into the presence of the Lords of the Imperium without express permission from me. By my life or death, I will guard them.'

Gorod looked around the reception hall. Holguin followed his gaze, taking in the immobile ranks of the Deathwing, moving across the Ultramarines Cataphractii Terminators guarding the entryway, past the wounded Azkaellon and his Sanguinary Guard prowling at the doors to the audience chamber, before coming to rest on the Space Wolves watch-pack lounging at the far side of the hall. There were some White Scars as well, and a few dozen soldiers of the

Praecental Guard. Holguin recognised amongst them the captain of the household division, Vodun Badorum.

The commander of the Invictarus elite turned his flat stare back to the leader of the Deathwing.

‘Well, that’s a relief.’

GO FORTH

SEVENTEEN

Hostile territory

Ultramar

The snow had been falling for several days, not quite a blizzard but enough to force down the air and anti-grav patrols across Illyrium. Sergeant Sacatus Demor of the Ultramarines found himself seconded to the First Legion as a guide to help them negotiate the ground on foot.

‘I grew up in the foothills, used to hunt in these mountains,’ he told his companions from the Dark Angels.

The Lion’s Legion had a reputation as being closed and taciturn, but he had found the ten black-clad warriors of Caliban approachable enough. They had left their Rhino at the bottom of the gorge and were advancing up the narrow defile on foot. A frozen stream lay beneath the snow, the footing uncertain, so they moved in double file alongside either bank, the rocky cliffs growing taller to each side the further west they marched.

‘Not enough trees,’ said Sergeant Thoran, the squad leader. ‘What game beast lives in such emptiness?’

‘Goldback bears, greathorn deer, wild agoraks,’ Demor replied. He stopped and pointed further up the defile. ‘There are caves ahead, about three hundred metres. Used to be a smuggler’s lair when I was a lad – could be used for a darker purpose now.’

Thoran nodded and signalled to two of his men to form rearguard. He slipped a long-bladed power axe free from a harness on his backpack and drew his bolt pistol. Demor followed suit, readying his gladius and sidearm. Thoran took the lead, the Ultramarines sergeant beside him, while the others split across the gorge in pairs.

Demor spotted the tracks first and called for a halt. Leading Thoran over a jumble of rocks, he pointed out three sets of footprints, the fresh snows barely covering them.

‘Less than an hour old,’ he said over the vox, kneeling beside the closest set of tracks. He studied them and then looked around for other evidence. ‘Two men and a woman, heading up the cleft. No tracks leading out.’

The first of the caves could be seen about one hundred and fifty metres up the gorge, piercing the cliff to the north, on their right. It was the smallest entrance,

barely a metre high; there were three others beyond that which were more accessible.

‘Casobourn, locality scan,’ voxed Thoran. The Dark Angel with the auspex took it off his belt and panned it back and forth.

‘Heat trace, following the trail,’ Casobourn confirmed. ‘Thermal register concentrated in the caverns ahead.’

Demor switched his view to thermic optimisation and could see the faint glow of heat from something within.

‘Could still be an animal,’ he said, but his hearts started to beat faster with the prospect of confrontation.

‘Capture if possible,’ Thoran reminded them all. ‘The Lion wants answers, not corpses. If Curze is here, we need intelligence.’

‘Stun grenades?’ suggested Demor, holstering his pistol to take a coin-sized disc from a container at his belt.

Thoran nodded and waved them on. The snow crunched underfoot while fresh fall turned to a sheen of moisture over their armour. They negotiated half-buried thorn bushes and boulders, weapons trained on the cave entrances ahead.

‘Movement, rapid,’ snapped Casobourn, holding the augur in front like a weapon. ‘Third entrance.’

‘Swift assault,’ barked Thoran, breaking into a run, ploughing through the snowdrifts in a flurry of white.

With powered strides they covered the last fifty metres in a few seconds, leaving thick furrows in the snow behind them. Demor spotted a flicker of shadow in the cave ahead. Someone standing between a light and the open entrance.

‘By the power of the Emperor Sanguinius, submit to arrest!’ Demor called out, his arm moving back with the stun grenade in his palm.

The shadow disappeared.

‘They’re moving further into the caves!’ warned Thoran, surging ahead, his axe blade glimmering blue in the strengthening snowfall. ‘Swiftly now! Asamund, Faretael, Dolmun, flank move.’

With the Dark Angels pounding into the caves ahead of him, Demor stashed the stun charge and set off after them. Buzzing lanterns threw bright yellow light across the interior, starkly illuminating seams of blue and green and gold in the walls.

There was nothing else in view – no bedding, no food, no kind of stores at all.

A formless apprehension slowed Demor as he took in this information. His instincts urged caution and he drew his pistol again, auto-senses flicking through the different spectra to see if there was anything hidden in the cave.

Turning his head, he looked back to the entrance. There were wires attached to the rock.

‘It’s a tr–’

The detonation cut off his warning. The mountainside collapsed onto him, sealing the caves with a tumbling, crushing wall of rock. In Demor’s last moments before a tonne of limestone broke open his helm and flattened his skull, the vox came alive with the shouts of the Dark Angels.

First surprise, and then their death cries.

From the cupola of the Whirlwind missile launcher, Parestor could see directly across the bridge into the heart of Madupolis. The ironwork crossing had been targeted once already by Illyrian dissidents, their home-made explosive insufficient to the task of toppling the heavy-gauge engineering.

Built across a canyon six hundred metres deep, the Madupolis highway linked eastern Illyrium to Macragge Civitas, a vital ground connection for the Dark Angels’ and Ultramarines’ forays into the mountains. Master Daevios had made it abundantly clear in his briefing that the security of the entire operation depended upon maintaining surface supplies to the patrols and garrisons pushing into the heart of the Hera’s Crown mountains. Parestor was not one to take any task lightly, even if an entire armoured company protected Madupolis around him.

‘I would wager we could baulk even the Iron Hands’ armoured fists from this position,’ he voxed down to the driver, Metrital. ‘What chance for hill bandits and petty gangsters?’

‘*Just keep a keen eye, nothing comes down that road without the signal from Sardeon’s checkpoint.*’

‘Affirmative,’ replied Parestor, turning the missile pods back towards the highway to the north-east.

A few minutes passed and then he saw a plume of spray from a vehicle moving quickly towards them. He could see nothing of the vehicle itself, but the size of the cloud behind it was considerable. Parestor activated the vox.

‘Sardeon, we have incoming. No permit transmission received. Confirm status.’

The vox hissed with static but no reply.

‘Sardeon, respond!’

Still nothing came back. Parestor switched to the general channel and broadcast the high alert signal.

‘This is *Xiphos three-epsilon* with incoming heavy vehicle. Checkpoint unresponsive. Request fire clearance from Order Command.’

The reply came a few seconds later, from Master Daevios’ provost, Hastenral.

‘*Vehicle has been designated a threat. Target with full effect.*’

‘Acknowledged, order command.’ Parestor switched to the internal vox. ‘How stupid do they think we are?’

‘*Maybe they think we’ll hesitate?*’ Metrital replied with a laugh.

Parestor armed the missile system, its high-powered surveyor array locking on to the approaching vehicle in milliseconds. The hum of the targeters grew to a whine as the missiles zeroed in on the heat from the truck’s exhaust. Parestor could see it now, half a kilometre away, a flatbed piled high with barrels and crates.

‘Crude,’ he said, and pressed the firing stud.

A four-missile salvo roared from the pods, arcing above the highway. Miniature cogitators in the projectiles calculated the incoming truck’s velocity and direction and cut their dive accordingly. With a final stab of blue plasma they plunged almost directly down in a tight cluster, hitting the cab and flatbed in unison.

Promethium plumed outwards as the storage vessels in the back of the truck exploded, sending a fireball hundreds of metres into the air. The explosion scattered flaming metal across the surface of the highway, trails of burning fuel licking across the dull black surface.

‘Contact the armoury, we are going to need something to move that wreck,’ Parestor told Metrital. ‘Command should send out a gunship to see what has happened to Sardeon’s squad.’

There was no reply.

‘Metrital?’

Parestor disengaged the cupola targeting link and pushed himself down into the hull of the Whirlwind. He ducked beneath the rails of the autoloader running across the top of the space, heading towards the driver’s compartment.

Through the doorway he noticed Metrital flopped over the controls. The side of his helm had been hacked open, the ceramite still smoking slightly from the blow of a powered blade.

He heard the clang of the access hatch behind him shutting, a moment before he noticed the winking lights of the melta-bombs attached to the spare missiles above his head.

Progress had been slow, but steady. Captain Neraellin had seen the reports from some of the other field commanders – Paladins and Masters who had been less circumspect in their approach to taming Illyrium. They had made great headway initially, but now many of them had slowed to a halt, overextended, cut off from orbital and air cover by the winter that had enveloped the north and eastern peaks of the Hera’s Crown mountains.

Neraellin had preferred a more systematic approach, new to the level of command that had been thrust upon him. He had sensed the impatience of his

junior officers, who had seen glory being snatched away from them for every kilometre the other columns advanced in front of them. Only his aide-de-militant Hexagia had shown total confidence in his approach, but her support was little comfort amongst the patient but knowing looks of his staff.

‘This will secure us Land Speeder coverage as far as the Clotrunis Ridge,’ Hexagia told him, handing over a data-slate with a map of the surrounding valleys and mountains.

‘I know,’ Neraellin replied. ‘I positioned it.’

Two Thunderhawk heavy transporters were descending in unison, a massive prefabricated launchpad and command station slung between them on dozens of high-tensile cables. The installation of the cestrus strongpoint would give his company’s Land Speeders and jetbikes a staging post for forays further into the mountains, its powerful augur array helping them negotiate the rough weather. Nearly one hundred and fifty tonnes of metal, ceramite and ferrocrete.

As much as a staging post, it was a stamp of Imperial authority. Illyrium would not rebel again.

The same weather that vexed the pilots had delayed deployment of the cestrus by three days, and Neraellin knew his warriors were chafing like hounds at the leashes, but they were not party to the series of disasters that had started to beset the more advanced columns. With the arrival of the cestrus, Neraellin’s company would have mobile outriders to clear the path for the armoured advance. He would not be ambushed like his brothers.

The Thunderhawks were moving their immense payload across the valley, ready to set it down on a flattened tier on the eastern flank, opposite the small town of Thiaphonis that clustered along the edges of the valley entrance.

Something bright lanced up from the buildings of the town, stark against the grey of clouds and stone. Neraellin could scarce believe what he had seen. A moment later the vox erupted with warning chimes and the shouts of his warriors.

‘*Lascannon, somewhere near the forum square.*’

‘Where are they? Coordinates, sergeant?’ Neraellin barked back.

‘*We took a hit, port wing!*’

Looking up, the captain saw smoke issuing from the flank of the closest transporter.

‘*We cannot evade, captain,*’ the pilot continued. ‘*By the teeth of the Nemochian Serpent, I can see another on the roof of the granaries!*’

Another beam of light sprang up from a different direction, lancing through the tailplane of the damaged Thunderhawk. It yawed to port, the cestrus swaying violently beneath. The sudden movement dragged the other transport down, bursts of plasma from its jets betraying the other pilot’s attempts to stay level.

The first lascannon fired again, a dozen support cables parting violently as the blast seared through them

‘Open fire!’ Neraellin shouted over the vox.

‘Where, captain?’ Hexagia asked, looking towards the streets of Thiaphonis on the opposite slopes. ‘With what? There are thousands of people in the town.’

Neraellin had left Caliban with the Lion and fought beneath the primarch for decades. Though he had never caught the eye of his master, he had made his way up the ranks with the same deliberate pace he had recently brought to the suppression of Illyrium. He had fought in hundreds of battles, commanded a starship and slain countless xenos, demented human survivors of Old Night and even former brethren from the traitor Legions.

None of it had prepared him for the moment.

His brain function was reduced to a trickle, faced with the decision of opening fire on the town. The logical part of him knew that he had to order the strike. If the Thunderhawks crashed on Thiaphonis, hundreds would be slain anyway. But to order a deliberate attack on a civilian centre strained every oath he had every sworn.

Inside, he screamed the command to attack the forum and granaries, knowing it was what the Lion would do. The words would not leave his lips.

Squads with jump packs were spearing into the town, but they would not arrive in time. How long did it take to recharge a lascannon? How many seconds had passed since the last shot had been fired?

The decision burst through his thoughts like a stream of tactical data swamping his visual display.

‘All forces, target grids five-six-seventeen through five-eight-seventeen. Full effect!’

The thunder of cannons reverberated across the valley a second later accompanied by the shriek of ascending rockets and the thud of self-propelled mortars, but the command had come too late. In the seconds before the centre of Thiaphonis was engulfed by a maelstrom of fire another white lance stabbed out, hitting the damaged transporter’s main engine block. The updraught of exploding munitions sent billowing black smoke across the valley even as the Thunderhawk twisted sharply, losing altitude.

The second Thunderhawk ejected its tow lines to avoid being dragged down, leaving the cestrus to pitch forty-five degrees as it fell. Neraellin turned his eyes away from the impending catastrophe, but he could still see the reflection of the crashing strongpoint reflected in the horrified gaze of Hexagia. The cataclysmic noise of the impact was carried out on a shockwave that ran the entire width of the valley, bringing with it a wall of snow and broken masonry.

Neraellin threw himself across Hexagia, standing over his adjutant as ice and stone cracked against his armour and thudded into the sides of the vehicles around him.

The tumult lasted only a few seconds, but it seemed much longer.

Stepping back, Neraellin was relieved to see his aide unharmed, her face reddened by the cold blast but nothing worse.

His relief died quickly as he turned back towards Thiaphonis. The town was wreathed in smoke and dust, but he could see flames starting to lick up the sides of the taller buildings. A gash a kilometre wide had been torn through the centre of the settlement. He watched the clock tower toppling into the central forum, sending up another wave of debris and smog.

Protecting Hexagia seemed scant consolation.

Even before Holguin handed over the report, the Lion knew that it was more bad news. The voted lieutenant's body language screamed reluctance as he reached out with the data-slate, eyes averted, body tilted towards the door as though wishing to depart immediately. All of his actions since coming to the new audience chamber had been that of a man approaching his own execution.

Sanguinius and Guilliman sat to the Lion's left. The Lord Warden had watched Holguin's arrival intently, doubtless coming to the same conclusions as the Lion. The regent emperor sat with one elbow on the arm of his throne, stroking his lip with a pale finger. It was impossible to know if his thoughts were in the hall or directed elsewhere.

'Just tell us,' said the primarch, ignoring the proffered slate.

'Another attack, my lords,' said Holguin, stating the obvious.

'Illyrium is aflame,' said Guilliman. 'I am surprised that there has been only one.'

'No, in the civitas, my lords,' Holguin quietly added. He offered the data-slate again. 'Please, my lords, watch this. A visual capture from a legionary of the Thirteenth.'

The Lion plucked the data-slate from Holguin's fingers and the voted lieutenant gratefully retreated a few paces. The primarch activated the projector so that all three of them could watch the recording.

It started peacefully enough, crowds moving past a checkpoint, the legionary scanning back and forth across the throng of people. In the corner of his vision was a large statue.

'The Illyrian Monument,' said Guilliman.

They continued watching as a young woman approached the legionary, a heavy shawl about her shoulders. He almost did not notice her emerging from the press of people. Suddenly she threw herself at the Space Marine, her arms flung wide, revealing cylindrical canisters slung beneath her cape.

The feed was silent but the Lion could read her lips.

‘*Illyri beo… fata?*’ he murmured as he watched the display fill with the expanding white flames of exploding promethium. He ended the projection and tossed the data-slate back to Holguin.

‘Long live Illyrium,’ Guilliman answered. ‘The old tongue of the mountains. Do you still think this is Curze’s work?’

‘Of course.’ The Lion looked to Sanguinius for a response, hoping for support, but the Blood Angel regarded him with an inquisitorial gaze. ‘What better screen for Curze’s activities than a populist rebellion?’

‘What point is Curze trying to make?’ asked Guilliman. ‘Leaving aside his demented love of theatrics, why would Curze anchor himself with the burden of a terrorist uprising? He must know that you will respond with even more force, driving him further underground.’

‘We should not give him what he wishes,’ said Sanguinius. ‘If it is Curze, he is provoking us for a reason.’

‘I concur, brother,’ said the Lion. ‘This rabble-rousing in Illyrium is a feint. The attack in Macragge Civitas shows that we have been placing too much emphasis on hunting Curze, when really we must concentrate all of our efforts in securing the capital.’

‘You think you can tighten security even more?’ said Guilliman. ‘Would you look to regulate even the air our citizens breathe?’

‘If I could…’ replied the Lion, ignoring the barb. He waved a hand towards Sanguinius. ‘We know what it is he seeks. He will come after us again, either alone or together.’

‘The more tyrannical the measures we take, the greater Curze’s sense of fulfilment,’ warned Guilliman. ‘He wants us to become him, to abuse the power we have been given. If we fall to such a lure, his own moral demise is excused.’

‘But he overlooks one important factor.’

‘What is that?’ Sanguinius leaned forward, intrigued. ‘We seek to rule others. What makes us different from Curze?’

‘We are right and he is wrong,’ replied the Lion.

Guilliman laughed without humour and the regent emperor sat back, disappointed.

‘Is it that simple?’ asked the primarch of the Ultramarines. ‘We sit on one side of a line and he the other?’

‘Always has it been the case,’ said the Lion. He remembered Holguin, who had been watching the exchange in silent acquiescence. ‘Little brother, what do you think?’

He looked surprised, caught unawares by the question. Holguin looked first at the Lion and then to Guilliman and finally Sanguinius.

‘Your assessment is correct, my liege. Nobody does a thing believing it to be wrong. There is no external measure for what is correct, only the judgement of our hearts and peers.’

‘Wise words,’ said Guilliman. ‘If a little equivocal. But it follows from such a position that if we make laws, if we create boundaries to restrain others, we must be bound and held by the same strictures.’

‘Of course, Lord Warden,’ said Holguin. ‘Forgive my simplicity, I have spent my years studying the doctrines of war, not philosophy. I know that other principles hold sway in Macragge and my arguments would be deficient.’

To this the Lion had to laugh, and Guilliman smiled also. Holguin did not realise why he had caused such humour and looked from one to the other with dumb confusion.

‘Do not worry yourself, little brother. Tell us, wise Holguin, what you would do in response to these latest attacks. You have heard our argument, now make a judgement upon it.’

‘It is not my place…’ Holguin faltered under the Lion’s determined stare.

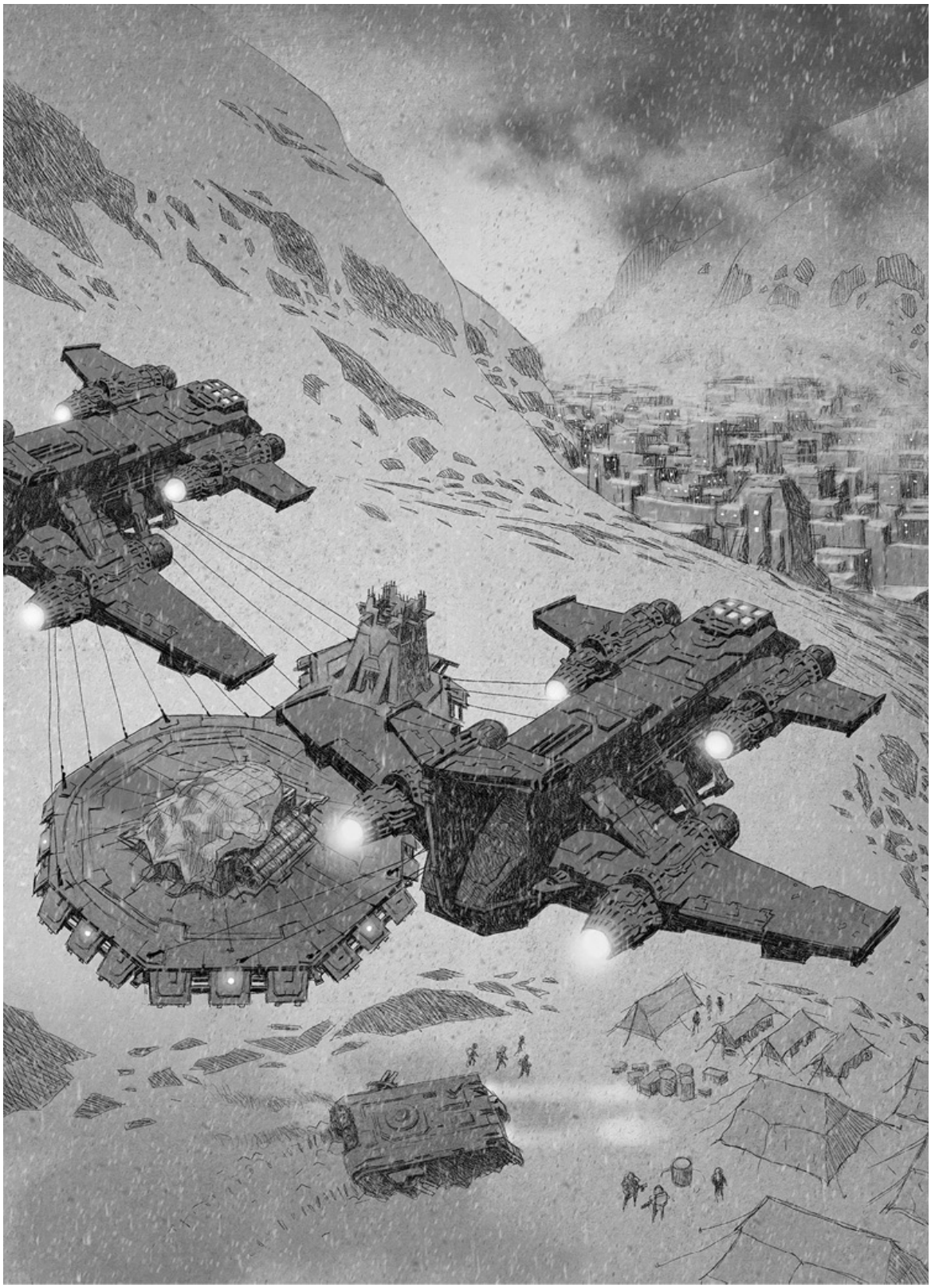
‘It is what I wish, little brother,’ said the primarch.

‘Very well, my liege,’ said the leader of the Deathwing. He took a breath. ‘I do not know whether Curze leads these attacks or not, but the response is the same. We cannot be drawn into escalating our presence in Illyrium. The winter worsens, and we fight on unfamiliar ground against a foe that knows every secret hole and lair in the mountains. The more we turn our attention to Illyrium, the less we spend on Macragge Civitas. What victory can we achieve there? If Curze is in control, he will not allow us to find him until he is ready. If not, then we deploy a Legion to fight a ragtag band of rebels. We do not march to their drum, but sound the beat ourselves. Our goal is the same, to defend the Imperial Triumvirate. All else is distraction.’

The primarchs greeted the pronouncement in silence. Holguin waited in trepidation for their response.

‘Your deputy has a keen mind,’ said Guilliman. ‘I could not have voiced it better.’

‘We are in agreement,’ said the Lion, again looking to Sanguinius for confirmation. He received a single nod in response. ‘We will withdraw to the borders of Illyrium and instigate stricter controls in Magna Macragge Civitas. Curze will have to come to us.’



Legion transporters struggle against the winter storms

EIGHTEEN

Old secrets

Caliban

‘We should not have allowed Belath to return to orbit,’ said Astelan, staring up into the sky.

‘We did not. Sar Luther did. On what pretence would we have stopped him?’ asked Zahariel. ‘You have been surly ever since the Grand Master informed us that Belath was to be allowed back to his gunship.’

‘Surly? I would have hoped you a better judge of character, Master Zahariel.’ Astelan pursed his lips, his expression at odds with his words. ‘I am concerned.’

‘My mistake, First Master,’ Zahariel replied, making it clear by his tone that it was no such thing. ‘Even so, your *concern* is ill-founded. What harm can Belath do in orbit?’

‘Harm? It is not the threat of harm that annoys me. It is the opportunity lost. He might leave. His ships, gone. A lifetime stranded on this… On Caliban. Did you consider that? What if he has suspicions?’

‘Of what? Nothing has happened. If he is suspicious, it is only of your boorish behaviour, Astelan.’

‘And if he goes back to Corswain or the Lion and tells them that something is amiss on Caliban? What if one of them returns to set straight our path?’

Zahariel had not considered this, and had no answers. Fortunately, he was saved having to admit as such. ‘You have been proven wrong.’ He pointed to the dark shape that rapidly resolved into a descending Stormbird. ‘Belath returns.’

They watched the gunship in silence, Astelan tense, Zahariel possessed by curiosity. The Master of the Mystai reached out with his thoughts as the Stormbird touched down. The tendril of Caliban’s power touched the hull and like a wire earthing a current it instantly buzzed with power as it connected with a psychic barrier.

Zahariel recoiled.

‘What is the matter?’ demanded Astelan.

‘We have a problem,’ snapped Zahariel. ‘Guard your thoughts!’

‘Guard my…?’

‘Belath is not alone, he has brought–’

Zahariel's explanation became self-evident as the ramp descended, revealing Chapter Master Belath and his companion. The second Space Marine was clad in black armour also, but the inset of his pauldrons was a deep blue. It was the signature colour of the Librarius, once home to Zahariel, the company of the Legion's psykers.

'I see,' Astelan whispered.

Zahariel's thoughts raced as he stared at the face of the approaching warrior. It was the Librarian he had seen in the mind of Belath. He remembered a name – Asmodeus – and tried to recall how potent the Librarian's powers were. It was hard after decades away and Zahariel was a poor judge of past achievements.

He had been right there when Nemiel had died. He had been the reason for it, though his own hands were clean of the deed. Zahariel wanted to demand if Asmodeus' life had been worth Nemiel giving up his? Had he earned that sacrifice? Before he could speak Astelan stepped forward, perhaps sensing Zahariel's aggression.

'You have brought a friend,' said the First Master. He looked at the Librarian and nodded in greeting. 'How nice.'

'This is Brother Asmodeus,' said the Chapter Master. Belath darted an angry glare at Zahariel. 'After my last visit, I thought it wise to take precautions.'

'I must apologise,' said Zahariel. As he spoke, he felt a shift in the play of psychic energy around Asmodeus. It was not like the gathering swirl of Caliban's power, but more like a pressure behind a mirror, distorting the reflection of reality. 'My actions were inexcusable, and I can only offer momentary grief as the explanation.'

'And what guarantee do I have that another such episode will not occur?'

The shift of power was not connected to the Librarian shielding Belath. It was externalising, heading towards Zahariel and Astelan, like a bow wave ahead of the approaching Dark Angels.

Asmodeus would know better than try to look inside Zahariel. His mind was fortified against all intrusion.

But Astelan?

In moments, the Librarian would be able to fish out everything. Not details, of course, but enough to know about the burgeoning rebellion, the imprisonment of the dissenters and Astelan's perfidious relationship with Luther.

Gripped by a sudden desperation, Zahariel threw a portion of his thoughts into the mind of the First Master.

'I understand that my word would be of little value at the moment,' Zahariel said out loud. While he spoke he formed his mental projection into a narrow spike, aiming it into Astelan's cerebellum. Asmodeus' intrusion was far subtler, a thousand tiny fibrous roots burrowing through Astelan's psycho-conditioning.

‘There have been developments, occurrences, that you should be aware of,’ said Belath’s comrade. ‘Increased perils.’

A moment of pure instinct caused Zahariel to flinch a moment before he made contact with Astelan’s inner thoughts. The core of the First Master’s mind was encased with a protective layer, the like of which the Master of the Mystai had not encountered. Even as he tried to avert his delving, it was as though he was punching through adamantium. The shock of the impact numbed him instantly.

Psychic feedback lanced into Zahariel’s brain.

A golden fog permeated everything.

A booming voice, the words unintelligible but commanding. Beside its power, Zahariel was as a candle next to the sun.

Warmth. Becoming hotter.

Searing. Scorching. Turning him to ash.

Zahariel ripped himself free from Astelan’s thoughts, reeling inside, every mote of discipline needed to show no outward sign of the agony that had been set inside his brain. He retained just enough cogency to witness Asmodeus’ attempt to penetrate the core layer. The attempt was far slower, but the reaction no less vehement. Inside Zahariel’s mind’s eye it was as though a plasma bomb had detonated, disintegrating the threads of Asmodeus’ investigation with a corona of white-hot energy.

The Librarian almost missed a step, recovering from the stumble at the last moment. He stared at Astelan with wide eyes.

The First Master seemed oblivious to all that had transpired.

‘I am sure that we can put behind us whatever unpleasantness has occurred,’ said Astelan, obviously not meaning a word of it. He matched Belath’s stare. ‘Are we not all brothers beneath the banner of the Legion?’

+What did you do to him?+ In his disorientated state, it took a moment for Zahariel to realise that Asmodeus’ words were transmitted, not spoken.

+Nothing,+ he replied in kind. Their thoughts merged close to the tiny flicker that was the light of Astelan’s mind. From outside it looked entirely normal.

+He is not one of us. He has no projection.+

+Did you see it?+ Zahariel asked. +Did you feel the power?+

+For an instant only, thankfully,+ the Librarian replied.

The exchange was near-instantaneous, far more efficient than clumsy lips and tongues. While the two psykers continued their hidden interaction, Zahariel turned and motioned towards the two Rhino transports waiting close to the landing apron.

‘Sar Luther has despatched a carrier to take you to the Angelicasta,’ Zahariel explained aloud. ‘I and Astelan have other duties to which we must attend.’

+I sensed that you were in his thoughts a moment before me,+ Asmodeus sent.

+A warning, nothing more. I confess that I am suspicious of your presence. You were present at the death of my cousin, Nemiel. My assault on Belath was unprovoked, highly regrettable, but it gives you no licence to spy on the thoughts of another.+

+Many are the licences that have been given, of late, that were not granted before. If it is of any consideration, the death of Nemiel pains me also.+

Zahariel nodded his thanks. +You were there, when my cousin was slain. It was against such intrusions that he warned. Was he right to think you unsafe?+

+I do not think you can judge that. Nemiel's fate was unfortunate, but he defied the Lion and risked all of our lives, perhaps even the future of the Imperium. The Lion acted poorly, in haste, and no doubt regrets it at his leisure.+

The intimacy of psychic communion almost lured Zahariel into revealing his new antipathy for the Lion, but he reined back his thoughts at the last moment.

'At least Master Luther seems to have retained something of the honour of the Legion,' Belath said, heading towards the transports. He glanced at Astelan but his gaze rested on Zahariel longer. 'But his indulgence of malcontents and outsiders has already cost him dearly and may do so again.'

+We will speak on these matters again,+ Zahariel sent to Asmodeus, cutting the contact.

'I must ask your indulgence, Chapter Master,' Asmodeus announced. 'I need to speak to Brother Zahariel. I will join you at the Angelicasta shortly. As the Librarius' overseer of recruits he needs to be appraised of recent threats and developments. The matter of Nikaea and the Lion's lifting of the ban must be discussed.'

Belath looked perturbed but nodded eventually.

'Very well. Master Luther awaits me for an audience. We shall meet after.'

When Belath had boarded the Rhino, Zahariel and the others headed for the second transport. Before they boarded, Zahariel motioned to Astelan to remain.

'Permit me a moment, brother,' the Master of the Mystai said to Asmodeus.

The Librarian strode up the Rhino's assault ramp without comment, leaving Zahariel with the First Master.

'What did He do to you?' Zahariel hissed, the question bursting out like water through a crack in a dam.

'Asmodeus?' Astelan glanced at the Rhino and shrugged. 'Nothing, that I know of.'

'Not him. The Emperor.'

Astelan's dumbfounded silence was as concise an answer as any he might have spoken.

'Do you remember anything from your time with the Emperor? Any specific moments when He might have…' Zahariel let the words drift away in the face of

his companion’s blank incomprehension.

‘What about the Emperor? You are babbling, Zahariel.’

‘It is… difficult to explain.’

‘Try,’ Astelan growled. ‘What were you saying about the Emperor?’

‘You were one of the First, yes?’ Zahariel said, choosing a different tack.

‘Before the First.’ Pride radiated from the ancient warrior. ‘An Angel of Death.’

‘You fought beside the Emperor, spent a great deal of time in His presence.’

‘Years, why?’

‘It has left a mark upon you, upon your mind,’ Zahariel said. It sounded weak, but he had no other theory he wanted to share. ‘A gift, you might call it.’

Astelan grinned and tapped the side of his head.

‘You tried to get in, didn’t you?’ He slapped a hand on Zahariel’s shoulder and looked back at the Rhino that Asmodeus had boarded. ‘He did too? Both of you found something surprising?’

It was Zahariel’s silence that answered this time.

‘Do you think the Emperor was the only powerful psyker vying for Terra during the last years of the Long Night? Dhul-Quarnayn? The Sigillites? Did we not expect to meet untold horrors in the shadows between stars? Of all those that understand the true nature of the universe, would the Emperor send out His warriors with the best war-plate to protect our bodies, when our minds were like a fortress with the gates unbarred and unguarded?’

Astelan thought about this for a few seconds, his gaze becoming distant with memory.

‘Were you all… I mean, all of the Angels of Death were protected? What was it like?’

‘It was… beautiful,’ Astelan replied. Then he focused on Zahariel again, expression hardening. ‘It was also taxing to the Emperor, I think. Not to be repeated for the Legions. Anyway, that is the past. The future is still being forged, and we have tasks at hand.’

The First Master entered the Rhino, leaving Zahariel alone with a whirl of thoughts. Luther, the Emperor, Belath, Asmodeus. It was all starting to blur into nonsense, a pointless web of intrigue and betrayed loyalties and oaths.

One thing remained pure, a bright blade that cut through the morass.

Caliban. The future of Caliban was indeed being forged. The time was fast approaching when it would be decided which hands would bring about that new future. Hands connected to ears that were being distracted by other allegiances and desires.

If Caliban were to be set free, the competing voices had to be silenced and Luther set back on the correct course.

He mounted the Rhino and signalled the driver to move out. Zahariel spared a conspiratorial smile for Astelan. An opponent, no doubt, but one best kept as an ally for the moment.

NINETEEN

A fated moment

Caliban

The banners overhead rustled in the breeze from the atmospheric units. Normally the sound was obscured by the shuffle and step of feet, the scrape of chairs, the murmur of conversation or the much heartier throb of a feast in full swing. Sitting alone, awaiting Belath, Luther had only the sounds of the hall to listen to.

Legion standards. Victories of the Dark Angels. He respected the achievements they represented, the last and largest being a celebration of the discovery and compliance of Caliban. Not by coincidence did it hang directly over the Lion's throne, directly above Luther's head.

How he had come to loathe that banner in recent years. None would know it, but he longed to reach up and tear it to shreds, spitting on the remnants. Not a day passed when he did not desire to unmake that day and everything it had brought.

The memory caused him to glance over his shoulder at the mightier throne behind him. The great rose window at the head of the hall threw the throne's shadow across Luther, an unplanned yet entirely prescient quirk of arrangement.

For all that the banners were from a time before him, nevertheless they had been hung here to remind him of who he was and what he had become.

For his entire life Luther had felt the weight of history upon his shoulders. A son to knights of the Order, it was his destiny to take up the blade and gun in defence of his people. Duty and honour had been his lot, from the first moment he had been brought into the world screaming, delivered upon the courtyard flagstones when his mother had been caught by a swift labour.

One might have scripted it, arriving in full view of the knights and serfs, lifted crying and bloody for all to see, his mother weeping with joy. Upon such events are the biographies of the greatest composed. His father had raced down the steps from the inner wall and held him against the cold breastplate of his armour.

The Grand Master's lip curled in an ironic smile. That moment – told to him, not remembered – was a metaphor for his upbringing. Always the love of his mother and the coldness of his father. Not that he felt sorry for himself in any way, such was simply the life of a child growing up in Aldurukh.

And he knew better than to linger on stories of destiny. He knew too many were the children born in stables, on stairwells, next to the kitchen stoves, whose

lives amounted to mediocrity or greatness in equal measure. Had he been born in the chambers of his parents, with midwife and physician in attendance, the bards would find a way to twist it into an omen of what later came to pass.

That fate had owed him nothing did not detract from his appreciation of what nature and nurture had given him. His birth might have been auspicious, but the teachings of his family and the inheritance of his mother's active mind played a greater role in delivering him up to the tides of greatness.

A superb shot, a master with the blade, these things singled out Luther early in his training. He would make serjant at the age of seventeen, the second youngest ever to do so. But it was not simply his skill at arms that his superiors recognised. He had an easy way with people, speaking equally to commoner and master. He had always been well regarded by his peers and superiors, and respected by his subordinates. It was natural that others wished to follow where he led, and just as natural that he took to leadership as a fish takes to a river.

Others might have been stalled by the politics of jealousy, or allowed their own ambitions to get ahead of the natural progression of matters. Neither of these factors were detrimental to Luther's rise. When Grand Master Ocedon died, Luther had been of an age – perhaps at the younger end of the scale – to be considered mature enough for the role. None thought it outrageous, and while some argued in favour of other candidates, none argued against his investiture.

So was to begin a golden age for the Order under the command of Luther.

A chance encounter – or the hand of greater powers than chance? – changed all of that. A forest clearing, a hunt for the Great Beasts and the meeting of Luther and the feral adolescent that would be named the Lion of the Forest by the Grand Master.

Lion El'Jonson.

So often told, so frequently embellished. Imperial historians marked it as the pivotal moment of Caliban's history, ignoring millennia of struggle and fighting to survive during what would be known as Old Night. The hundreds of years from Aldurukh's founding to the discovery of the Lion were rendered irrelevant by the pens of fawning chroniclers.

Caliban and the Order had been changed, that was for certain. Even now, after everything that had transpired, Luther remembered fondly that time of their own crusade, driving back the wildness of Caliban, creating a new era of the Order.

He knew that some, Astelan and others of his ilk, thought him jealous of those times, having to hand power to the primarch. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Lion had quality throughout, as brave, noble and loving as any servant would wish from a master. As others had been happy to follow Luther, so he had been joyous to find a son-cum-brother who would eclipse all previous achievements.

He stood and looked at the throne, its wood blackened with lacquer, the high and broad back carved with the likeness of a lion matching that upon the breastplate of the primarch's finest wargear.

Luther did not hate the primarch. He could not, for he could never hate his own family.

His gaze moved to the banner again, of the Dark Angels.

Why *dark*, Luther wondered? When they had been renamed, why had the Emperor seen fit to call them His Dark Angels? Was it intended to intimidate His enemies? Had it been a joke, perhaps, on some cosmic scale that only the Master of Mankind understood?

He could believe the latter. A double-edged name, admitting their heavenly origins whilst condemning them to a future of darkness. The Lion adored the Emperor, more than any son loved a father, and in that had been his greatest weakness.

The day Luther met the Lion was not the day the Grand Master rued. It was the day the Emperor's warriors found them that was to be the start of all that had gone wrong.

As though the universe also enjoyed a sense of comic timing, the hall resounded with the thud of a gauntleted fist on heavy wood. The door wardens opened the great portal to admit Belath, who stopped and looked around at the banners and trophies, this time more aware of them than during his previous visit.

Luther was still standing in front of his chair, also contemplating the standards on display.

'Welcome, Chapter Master Belath,' Luther declared, hurrying down the hall to meet the Chapter Master partway. He offered a hand, which Belath shook without thought. 'I wanted to apologise and make amends for my misstep during our first meeting.'

'Misstep, Master Luther?'

'My overenthusiastic greeting in this very hall. I should have attended to your request for discretion more diligently. As it is, Caliban is astir with stories about your return.'

'I would have you think nothing more on it, Master Luther. My pressing concern is for…'

Belath tailed away and turned as the doors opened with a babble of voices. A dozen serfs entered, dressed in hose and tunics and heavy aprons, dragging with them blocks of polish and buckets of water.

'How unfortunate,' declared Luther, though prearrangement rather than fortune had ensured the menials had entered only moments after Belath. 'Another embarrassment! The hall needs to be prepared for the banquet. I should have remembered and arranged our meeting in a more apt location.'

‘What banquet, Master Luther?’

‘Your feast of honour, Chapter Master. Your triumph, of course.’

‘I don’t want a feast. I want to take the recruits, and get back to Corswain with thirty thousand fresh warriors.’

‘Of course you do, Belath.’ Though he was shorter than the Space Marine by ten centimetres, Luther was able to angle himself in such a way as to shepherd him towards one of the side doors. Arm outstretched, he guided the Chapter Master from the hall.

‘I do not understand the delays,’ Belath continued as they walked down a long gallery heading towards the western wall of the citadel. ‘It has been eleven days since I made my needs known. Surely you have been prepared for this moment. A suspicious man might think you were delaying our departure on purpose.’

‘Prepared, yes. Ready? That is not quite the same thing,’ Luther admitted with a rueful look. ‘One does not simply sweep up thirty thousand Space Marines and fling them into orbit, as you know, Chapter Master.’

‘The victualling has proceeded without hindrance. I don’t see why we have yet to see a single warrior in orbit.’

‘They have been training for their whole lives, Belath. This is a grand moment for them. But you must remember that they are untested in true battle. They have been a garrison, not a force of assault and offence. We must ensure that they are as battle-ready as possible the moment they set foot on your ships.’

While they spoke they traversed several more corridors and smaller halls, until Luther had led them to a small cloister that ran alongside the Angelicasta’s innermost wall. A set of stone steps led to the rampart, flanked by an iron rail forged in the likeness of two intertwined serpents. The design was almost invisible from centuries of hands clasping the ancient metal.

‘I must also insist about the feast, brother,’ Luther continued as he took the steps two at a stride. Belath followed closely. ‘It is only fitting that we honour the departure of Caliban’s sons with a suitable occasion.’

From the rampart they looked down into the eastern proving grounds of Aldurukh. Here there was a virtually empty stretch of ground for five kilometres, until the Gate of Aster in the curtain wall. Normally the two-kilometre-wide area was used to mock up battlefields or create firing ranges for heavy-weapons practice and close armoured manoeuvres. Makeshift trenches had been filled in and bunkers dismantled.

The proving ground was filled with warriors armoured in black plate. Banners of green and red, the colours of Caliban, and blazoned with symbols from the same tradition fluttered above their command squads. Rhino transports in shining ebon livery stood beside each unit.

‘Ten thousand strong,’ announced Luther with a broad grin. He held up a hand, and at his signal the assembled warriors raised weapons in a perfectly unified salute. ‘A host fit for Corswain, and but a third of the complement you will be taking to him, Chapter Master.’

‘It is remarkable,’ said Belath, but his expression was guarded. ‘Such spectacle as might have once stirred me is now commonplace in my memories. I have seen a Legion at war, Master Luther, and there is nothing like it. Ten thousand warriors at parade is impressive, but I witnessed a night drop of forty thousand Dark Angels at the pacification of Aurentius Two…’ He sighed. ‘But thank you for demonstrating that the troops are ready to embark today.’

Luther fought to control his temper. No small effort had gone into preparing this display and Belath’s crass dismissal served only to remind the Grand Master of the glories and renown he should have earned at the side of the Lion.

He could also not ignore the possibility that Belath was being purposefully indifferent to assert his own authority. Such a thought brought Luther back to his original intent.

‘As I said before, I must insist that you attend the triumphal feast, Master Belath.’

‘Your insistence is wasted, Master Luther.’ Belath looked down at the Grand Master and there was regret in his eyes. ‘When I was an infant you were my hero, even more than the Lion. I could never become a primarch, but you were the example to which I aspired. A man of Caliban, risen to the greatest heights of power and glory. It turns my heart that you have been stranded here, and if it were in my power to say otherwise, I would gladly hand these warriors to you and take up the burden of Caliban’s protection.’

His expression grew sterner.

‘But it is not to be. Your feasts can’t soften me, your kind words and…’ he waved a hand at the Space Marines still stood at the salute, ‘…your demonstrations can’t flatter or sway me. By the Lion’s command you were placed upon this world and no other word can lift you from it. It was a punishment masquerading as an honour, many of us could see that from the outset. It might even be unjust, but that is not for us to decide, is it, Master Luther?’

‘Even if you were to offer me command of this expedition, I would not take it,’ Luther replied, speaking the truth – though his meaning was not as Belath would interpret it. He let some hardness enter his voice. ‘Also, you must realise that these are not your warriors. Not yet. They are mine. They belong to Caliban.’

Luther raised a hand to stall any protest.

‘In their hearts,’ the Grand Master added. ‘The Legion and the primarch are distant figures. Many of them have lived their entire lives never knowing anything but this isolation. The feast is my endorsement. My authority will pass

to you and your men. If you do not attend, I cannot in all conscience pass these warriors to you, for they will not accept you as their leader.'

'That would be insubordination,' growled Belath.

'I hoped that you would not take offence.' Luther had expected as much from the close-minded Chapter Master. 'This is not an insult or a threat, but a solution. You stand now receiving their salute next to me. In the morning when you return to your ships you shall receive it alone. The mantle will be passed.'

The Space Marine's eyes narrowed and jaw clenched, but he said nothing.

'I am giving you thirty thousand warriors, Chapter Master. Thirty thousand Space Marines. In these turbulent times, such a thing could make or break a war. I am trusting you with this weapon, in the belief that it will fall upon the *proper* foe.' Luther looked at the host of warriors, feigning a melancholic turn. 'More than any previous generation, these are my little brothers. I willingly release them to you, but let us not do so as a furtive exchange of goods. Let us mark this occasion, knowing that history will remember this day as keenly as many others in Caliban's noble past and glorious future. A feast, brother with brother, to mark all that we share still, to celebrate your past victories and to speed you to fresh ones.'

Luther's sudden smile was like the full heat of the sun, all-encompassing and overpowering, and Belath cracked after just a few seconds. When he grinned, the scarred warrior had a boyish look even now, and he bowed his head unconsciously in deference to the Grand Master.

'We shall laud all of you, of course,' Luther concluded. 'Gunships will be sent to bring your veterans down to Caliban for their triumph. A wing of the Angelicasta has been assigned to allow them to prepare for the banquet tonight.'

Without waiting for a reply, Luther motioned to a figure standing to one side of the arrayed Space Marines below. It was Astelan, standing beneath two banners – one his personal standard from the Legion, the other the honorary banner of his Chapter that had been brought forth from the vaults that morning. Astelan made no direct response, but an instant later the Space Marines lowered their weapons at his unheard command, did an about-turn and set off at a slow march towards the distant gate.

At the same moment, the roar of gunships sounded overhead and a flotilla of Thunderhawks and Stormbirds started a spiralling descent to the transport terminal a kilometre outside the city.

Turning his back on the display, its majesty sullied by his companion's state of indifference, Luther guided Belath to the quarters that had been set aside. There he left the Chapter Master to the diligent attendance of Aldurukh's army of squires and serfs.

A few strides from leaving Belath's company, Luther heard other footsteps fall in just behind him.

'Do you think he will come around to our point of view?' asked Lord Cypher.

'That will be your goal this afternoon,' Luther replied without looking around. 'Astelan will have the first cadre brought down within ninety minutes. Until then, spend your time with Belath. He is the keystone, of course.'

'And the others?'

'You have seven hours to speak to as many of them as you can. You are the Lord Cypher. You are the Order. They will all be Calibanites, remind them that the Order *is* Caliban.'

'I am aware of the duty before me, Sar Luther.'

Luther stopped abruptly. He met Lord Cypher's cowled gaze.

'You disapprove of making overtures to Belath and his men?'

'It seems an unnecessary complication. When we have them on Caliban, we no longer require their cooperation.'

'Require? *Require?*' Luther bared his teeth. 'If we did only that which is required, we would meekly serve out our time until the Emperor, Horus or the Lion returned to place us in bondage once again. We do what is *right*, Lord Cypher. We bring honour to the Order, to Caliban. If not for these values, why persist? It is our way of life, our traditions, our worth that we strive to protect.'

'And if Belath's company of warriors no longer share those traditions and values?'

'Astelan has already called my dedication into question, albeit obliquely. I do not need the same from my closest advisor.'

'It is rare that I and the Terran are in accord. Perhaps that is worth noting. And we have not yet been answered, Sar Luther.'

'Nor will words suffice,' snapped Luther. 'Only in the moment, when pressed to make the decision, to act or not act, can any of us be sure of our thoughts and deeds. What assurance would I give that could not be undermined by doubt?'

'Simply tell me the truth, brother,' said Lord Cypher, his tone conciliatory. 'If Belath will not be turned to our cause, will you give the command to silence his dissent permanently?'

'Truth? There is no wisdom save in truth. Truth is everlasting, but our ideas about truth are changeable. Only a little of the first fruits of wisdom, only a few fragments of the boundless heights, breadths and depths of truth, have I been able to gather. I have not forgotten that there are questions still unanswered about what happened in the Northwilds. Serve me better today than you did then and perhaps my queries will pass from thought.'

Lord Cypher regarded his commander for a moment, perhaps trying to gauge the depth of his intent. His enquiry was met with a flinty stare.

‘Be about your duties,’ Luther told him. ‘If you are diligent, the time of testing might yet be postponed and we shall all fare better for it. If I am forced onto the horns of such a dilemma, regard it as your failing that I have been placed there.’

Luther spun and strode away, feeling Lord Cypher’s gaze on his back. The truth, the Grand Master told himself, was that even he did not know if he could order the death of Belath and his company.

It was a bridge he would have to cross – or burn – only when he arrived upon it.

TWENTY

Griffayn of the Firewing

Caliban

The antechamber to the Hall of Decemial was itself larger than many audience chambers within Aldurukh, and the complement of Dark Angels gathering within it did little to fill the space. Their mission was still active and so despite being on home soil, surrounded by the fortifications of Aldurukh, by decree every warrior remained armoured and armed. Luther had expected as much – was counting upon it, he had confided to Zahariel when he had impressed upon the Master of the Mystai the importance of his psykers' role in the unfolding drama.

The Dark Angels came together in a knot just a few metres from the great doors, clustered together despite the space into which they could have drifted. They unconsciously divided into smaller groups that were subtle but perfectly visible from the balcony above, where Zahariel watched with his Mystai beside him. They too were clad in battleplate, pistols and blades worn on their belts.

The officers, four of them in addition to Belath, stood the closest to the doors, expecting to be admitted first. They said little to each other and watched their subordinates closely. Occasionally one or other would glance up towards the balcony, but they paid little attention to their observers. The Librarian, Asmodeus, stood a little way from the other ranking Space Marines, face set with concentration.

+That is why we cannot scan them from here,+ Zahariel said to his companions, using thoughts rather than words. +Do not stray from the plan and they will never know that we have been probing them.+

The others, thirty-one of them, were grouped into three clutches of varying size. Most of them, twenty or so, stood apart from the officers and talked quietly, gesturing to their grand surroundings. Zahariel could feel relief and a sense of homecoming from them and knew that they had been the individuals assigned to command of the transports; weeks in the warp, alone in the raging storms and not knowing if they would ever see Caliban or their brothers again. They would be from all across Corswain's command, from different Orders and Chapters. Volunteers, most likely.

+A strange cabal of warriors.+ Vassago's thoughts came to Zahariel directly, but he felt the touch of the others' minds too. +To forego the ongoing battle

against Typhon and his Death Guard to captain a virtually unarmed troop transport through the tempests that befoul the warp.+

+Ambitious, perhaps?+ suggested Cartheus.

Zahariel shook his head. +Unlikely. Lone Space Marines commanding crews of menials. Little chance of citation and promotion, even if it does demonstrate a peculiar type of courage.+

+Discontents more likely, happy to be away from the all-seeing gaze of the Legion,+ said Vassago, his thoughts tinted by a wash of hope that such would be the case.

+That does not automatically make them allies,+ countered Asradael. +Or useful ones, at any rate.+

The more Zahariel considered this, the less he was convinced.

+The opposite of troublemakers,+ he told the Mystai. +They had to be utterly dedicated, totally loyal to Corswain and the Legion. Trusted enough to get to Caliban and then to set out in search of the Dark Angels fleet somewhere in the vastness of the galaxy with a force that could topple a world.+

+But to send away his best cadre?+ asked Cartheus.

+He needs thirty thousand warriors more than he needed a few dozen of his best.+

+Wait, another comes!+ Vassago's blunt thought broke through any further contemplation of the remaining Dark Angels. +As the forests are green, I don't believe it! Nobody said that the Spear-Cast had returned.+

The legionary who had entered was uniformed as the rest, but for a thick black sash that was draped over his left shoulder, obscuring the markings beneath. From the remaining livery it was possible to tell that he held the rank of sergeant-at-arms, but from the way the conversations stopped and all eyes turned to him it was clear that he carried more authority than simple rank.

Zahariel knew him immediately, in person and by repute. He spoke aloud.

'Griffayn.'

The other groups immediately reorganised themselves, eight of the Space Marines breaking away to meet the new arrival. They held close conference for a few seconds and then Griffayn moved away to stand with the officers beside Belath.

'Why would Corswain send away the voted lieutenant of the Firewing?' Vassago asked.

'He wears a half-shroud,' pointed out Cartheus, referring to the obscured heraldry. 'His position is in abeyance.'

'Not to his Firewing brethren,' Zahariel replied, drawing their attention to the Space Marines that had spoken to Griffayn. They talked quickly with the other

groups, passing on some message or other. Some of the other Dark Angels nodded, while some looked stony-faced and turned away.

Zahariel watched this micro-political interplay with fascination, wondering how it would end and what had caused such fault lines to emerge and shift. The answer to the second question was perhaps answered when, two minutes after Griffayn had appeared, Lord Cypher entered the antechamber.

The Guardian of the Order wore his full, ornate helm, still showing nothing of his features. He stepped to one side, heralding the entry of Luther. The Grand Master wore black powered plate fashioned for him by the Lion's personal armourers, the overlapping bands and heavily riveted vambraces and greaves reminiscent of the early marks of Legiones Astartes armour. A cloak of striped pelt, white and red, hung from his shoulders, and the colours were repeated on a prominent shield-shaped besagew between the cuirass and left pauldron.

His arrival signalled to Zahariel that it was time to join the company. The Mystai descended as Luther strode across the hall to greet Belath and his companions. By the time Zahariel had reached the bottom of the winding iron staircase, the Chapter Master was being ushered towards the main hall. The psykers waited to one side as Lord Cypher directed the remaining Dark Angels to follow their officers.

Zahariel exchanged looks with his Mystai as the last of Belath's Space Marines strode into the banqueting hall.

+Asmodeus will sit with the officers, do not try to open up any of their thoughts,+ he sent, repeating the warning he had given twice already but feeling no guilt for labouring the point. +Work softly and smoothly through the others. If you cannot get a firm response from a light scan, move on and I will attend to it. Do not force your way in, nor try to prise free that which does not come easily.+

They looked at him with the patient expressions of loyal followers that knew well what they had to do, enduring the lecture with good grace. Agitated by what might happen in the next hour or two, Zahariel had no patience in return.

+The future of Caliban depends upon us, this night,+ he reminded them. +A stray move, a wrong step, and not only will the Order be damned – we condemn our world to an eternity of slavery. Are you prepared?+

Their looks were more sincere now as they nodded their readiness.

+Good.+ He half turned and waved to a group of serfs that had silently entered, each bearing a wide silver tray laden with goblets, half silver and half gold on each salver. +Now let us honour our guests in proper fashion.+

The roar of plasma jets drowned out Galedan's words as he hurried across the black landing apron of the launch port. Dust from the Stormbird's downdraught whirled around the Chapter Master as he caught up with Astelan at the foot of the ramp.

‘What was that?’ the First Master asked with a shout.

‘A transmission from Lord Cypher,’ Galedan said again, leaning closer. ‘He says that Griffayn will likely keep his oaths to the Order.’

‘“Likely”? Was that the exact word he used? Not “very likely” or “most likely”?’

‘His actual word, First Master.’

Astelan nodded his acceptance of the message and started up the ramp, Galedan at his heel. He stopped a few strides from the top, caught in two minds. This state of hesitation annoyed him, an unfamiliar sense of doubt creeping into his thoughts.

‘That will soften Sar Luther’s mood, I suspect,’ he said to Galedan. ‘If Griffayn has agreed to sit at the council table, Belath could follow.’

‘Isn’t that a good thing? More warriors to the cause, commanders at that. Wouldn’t we rather avoid having to take more prisoners?’

Astelan grimaced, unseen behind the visored mask of his helm. It was imperative that he maintained his place within Luther’s inner circle. The inclusion of Griffayn and possibly Belath threatened that. Both were Calibanites, and neither thought kindly of Astelan. One he might be able to control, but both…

He hurried up the last few metres of the ramp.

‘You are right. I am dead against taking more prisoners, Galedan. Dead against it.’

TWENTY-ONE

We have come

Ultramar

It was more of a rabble than a crowd, in Holguin's opinion. He counted forty-three civilians pushing their way up to the checkpoint at the Porta Hera, shouting slogans, pumping fists wrapped with red towels and scarves.

Holguin glanced at his companion. Vodun Badorum wore steel, silver and grey like the soldiers of the Praecental household he led, topped by a cobalt-blue cape. A plasma carbine hung from a sash across his chest, nestled against his hip.

'What are they doing?'

'Protesting.'

'Why?'

Badorum looked up in surprise. 'Your new security measures mean that the grain mills only run at half-shift. The workers are on rationed bread at the moment. The blanket suppression of the civilian communications network has eliminated several popular entertainment frequencies. The red scarves signify that they have worked their hands to the bloody bone.'

'What do you mean, "your security measures"?'

'*Our* security measures, of course,' Badorum said quickly.

'That does not explain why they protest.'

'Because they are unhappy. They wish us to know that. To send a message to the Triumvirate.'

Holguin shook his head, confused by this. 'To what end? Do they think that the emperor will change his mind on the whim of a few dozen individuals? They look like troublemakers to me.'

'They are just ordinary folk who feel that they have been overlooked. They want to vent their anger a bit, but they'll not cause any real trouble.'

'They are already causing trouble.' Holguin pointed to the Avenue of Heroes, where the leaders of the demonstration were remonstrating with Badorum's men at the gate. It was clear they were demanding entry but such a thing was impossible. 'They are also in violation of the edict against congregations of more than five persons in a public space.'

'Well, yes,' said Badorum, uncertain.

‘The presence of large bodies of people can conceal the activities of the rebels and their sympathisers,’ Holguin said sternly, annoyed that he should have to point out such an obvious fact to the commander of the household guard. It was no wonder Curze had come so close to the regent emperor with such weak-willed men guarding the Fortress of Hera. ‘They need to be dispersed immediately.’

Again Badorum vacillated, his face radiating consternation.

‘If we let them just shout it out for a bit, they’ll go home soon. All we’ll do by forcing the issue is create more resentment.’

‘They need to learn discipline,’ Holguin said. ‘It is for their protection that the new security protocols have been implemented. Do they think that the edicts were passed for the sake of it? This unseemly act is selfishness of the highest order. I require you to disperse this illegal gathering. It is a threat to the security of the Imperial Triumvirate. If you do not take action, I will have to.’

‘By nonlethal means, of course,’ said Badorum, darting a worried glance towards Holguin.

‘“Nonlethal” does not feature in the vocabulary of the Legiones Astartes. Even when unarmed.’

It was clear that Badorum had spent much time amongst warriors of the Ultramarines, comfortable around the giant legionaries in a way many others were not. But in that moment he looked like a lost child, his face paling as he realised Holguin was not joking.

‘This will only get worse,’ he warned, starting towards the gate. ‘We cannot arrest everyone that disagrees with the Lord Protector.’

Holguin said nothing as he watched Badorum calling out to his men, waving furiously for them to follow him down to the gate.

I’m sure we can, thought Holguin. He turned back up towards the Fortress of Hera, confident that Badorum would do what needed to be done.

Representations of a different kind were being made in the audience hall of Sanguinius. The Lion paced back and forth before the throne of the Imperator Regis, iterating the events in Illyrium, each announcement accompanied by the crack of his fist into the palm of his other hand.

‘Two megaloaders were driven into the shuttle port at Oxadius. Death toll, thirteen. More than fifty wounded. All civilian. Six bodies found flayed in the *silva altum*, blindfolded. Soldiers from the territorial militia, including a praetor-colonel. Senator Pilviora’s domicile was burned to the ground. Thankfully she was in Macragge Civitas at the time, making an appeal to this chamber for assistance.’

‘Enough,’ growled Guilliman. ‘A catalogue of atrocities. We understand.’

‘You do not,’ said the Lion. ‘In total, more than five hundred casualties, nearly half of them slain in just eight days since we instituted the clear-ground policy.

Curze will not be lured into the open so easily. Attacks in the capital have increased five-fold. Seven of my warriors are in the apothecarion, another two have paid the ultimate price for doing their duty.'

'What else would you do?' asked Sanguinius. 'It was your decision to withdraw from Illyrium altogether. Was that the wrong policy?'

'It has been the wrong policy to *placate* Illyrium,' the Lion replied. 'The Illyrians have no loyalty to us at all. They shelter the dissidents, giving them succour and haven. These are not an alien foe, an enemy from the exterior, but an army that has simply been waiting for the opportunity to strike. Curze has given them that chance.'

'There has still been no evidence that Curze is in Illyrium at all,' countered Guilliman. 'Or is still there if he ever was.'

'You give no credit to coincidence any more than I do, brother,' the Lion said, his manner becoming more diplomatic. 'We know that Curze did not leave Macragge. He cannot be in Macragge Civitas, but he can achieve nothing elsewhere. The dissident nature of Illyrium gives him the perfect sanctuary. I would deny him that shelter, and rid Macragge of a cancer at the same time.'

'What do you mean?' Guilliman leaned forward, troubled by the Lion's words.

'Too long Illyrium has gone unpunished for its misdeeds. Even in the lifetime of your father, it was the birthplace of violence and discontent. There can be no cure for this infection at the heart of the Imperium, save complete excision.'

'Illyrium is not a single entity – it is a place filled with people of many loyalties and manners,' Guilliman said, fearing the direction of his brother's argument. He looked to Sanguinius but the emperor said nothing. 'You cannot condemn a whole state for the crimes of a few.'

'Not a few!' Spittle flew at the Lion's outburst. 'Illyrium is non-compliant by any terms of definition. Your planet, the capital of the Five Hundred Worlds, has harboured dissident elements since the inception of the Imperium! They are not your citizens, brother. They do not want to be your citizens and will not serve the Imperium. They betrayed and killed your father!'

'How dare you bring mention of Konor to this debate?' Guilliman snapped back. 'He sought peace by all means. If I were to strike back in his memory it would not be justice, it would be revenge.'

'You are weak,' the Lion said with a shake of his head. 'We fight for the future of mankind. There can be no forgiveness, no remorse.'

'Make plain what you suggest, brother,' said Sanguinius, knitting his fingers together beneath his chin.

'Illyrium's infrastructure is minimal, its resources scarce. The contribution to the Imperium is far outweighed by the resources spent trying to regain control and maintain authority.' The Lion paused and stared at the regent emperor.

‘Orbital scouring. Measured, directed annihilation of all opposition within Illyrium.’

Guilliman was out of his seat with a shout.

‘Insanity!’ He rounded on Sanguinius, appalled that his brother and emperor did not seem the least bit horrified by the suggestion. ‘This is no solution at all!’

‘A few million people are an anchor on our three Legions,’ the Lion continued relentlessly, ignoring Guilliman, his attention fixed on the emperor. ‘How many of the Five Hundred Worlds still burn because we have this constricting thornvine about our throats? Better to burn it to the root and be free of its grasp forever.’

‘A few million?’ Guilliman could hardly speak out of a gathering rage. ‘My people are not expendable at any cost.’

‘Your people?’ The Lion’s voice dropped, his eyes narrowed as he turned on the Lord Warden. ‘*Your* people? Are they not *our* people? And if not, if one of us may lay claim to their fealty above the others, is it not our brother upon the throne?’

The Lion gestured towards Sanguinius, who was watching Guilliman with a hawk-like stare. The primarch of the Ultramarines had to draw deep on his reserves of patience and nerve, biting back the arguments that sprang to his lips.

It was an impossible situation. Imperium Secundus worked only because he and the Lion had entrusted its rule to Sanguinius. Responsibilities had been divided between the three of them, but true authority resided with the Imperator Regis. It was Guilliman’s role as Lord Warden to enact the wishes of the Imperator Regis, not to define them, just as the Lion was bound by his oaths to obey Sanguinius’ commands on military matters.

It would be overstepping the mark to defy Sanguinius openly, effectively placing Guilliman’s will over that of the Triumvirate. He could not believe that the Lion had deliberately manipulated him into this situation, but nonetheless his brother would certainly exploit any sign that Guilliman thought himself above the emperor. Sanguinius, already wary of the power thrust upon him, would not look kindly upon any intimation that he was simply being used as a puppet by Guilliman, regardless of his true intent.

All this flashed through Guilliman’s mind in an instant. His answer sprang unbidden from his thoughts, his natural statesmanship saving him at the last.

‘I cannot argue on practical or theoretical grounds against my brother’s proposition,’ he said, addressing Sanguinius directly. His tone was calm, measured, seeking to enforce reflection and reason over reactionary instinct. ‘But on moral grounds I would argue that the eradication of four million citizens of the Imperium on the vague chance that Curze is amongst them is repugnant, and no action that would be undertaken by a leadership that professes to act on behalf of mankind’s best interests.’

‘How many of the Five Hundred Worlds resisted compliance?’ the Lion asked quietly. ‘How many came to the Imperium after bombardment, after you set your Legion upon them?’

‘Thirty-eight,’ Guilliman responded. ‘I remember each and every one clearly. Would you like me to list the names?’

‘Please don’t.’

‘We would employ such tactics only after all other attempts at compliance had failed,’ Guilliman added sharply, tiring of his brother’s attacks. ‘*All* other attempts. Yet it seems you would take a battlecannon to swat a troublesome fly, brother. The consequences for Macragge, for this new Imperium, would be disastrous if we were to consider such a thing now. What gains would the lie-masters of Horus make from such heavy-handed tyranny?’

In the next few moments Guilliman could see Imperium Secundus falling to tatters around him. If that was to be, it was to be. To persist with an abomination was worse than seeing his great hope crumble slowly.

‘I do not support this proposal,’ he said formally. He met Sanguinius’ enquiring gaze with a stare and swallowed hard. If he was to be accused as a kingmaker and puppetmaster, better to flex what political muscles he possessed. ‘If it is the will of our lord emperor to set starships against his own people, I will have no part of it. The Imperial Triumvirate will dissolve, and with it any semblance of moral authority to rule the Five Hundred Worlds, much less build a new Imperium of Man.’

‘Blackmail, brother?’ said the Lion.

‘Quiet.’ Sanguinius’ single word silenced the primarch of the Dark Angels, who glowered at Guilliman with arms crossed, jaw clenched.

The Lord Regent sighed, gaze moving from one primarch to the other and back, weighing each of them, assessing their arguments.

‘There is no benefit in destroying Illyrium from orbit,’ Sanguinius declared. Relief flooded Guilliman, though it was short-lived, as he sensed a caveat approaching. ‘I believe that Curze is behind this uprising, and with his removal the rebellion can be quashed by conventional and political means. Orbital strike does not guarantee the death of Curze.’

The emperor stood up and directed his words at the Lion.

‘This is to be your sole objective, brother. Apprehend Curze and bring him to justice for his crimes. When that is accomplished, the Lord Warden can deal with Illyrium as needed.’

‘By what means, brother?’ asked the Lion.

‘Any necessary,’ replied Sanguinius. ‘Short of wiping out Illyrium from orbit, I want no more to be troubled by Curze and his venom.’

Sanguinius signalled that the audience was over and strode from the hall, leaving Guilliman and the Lion facing each other in stony silence. Guilliman searched his brother's expression for any sign of triumph but the Lion's face was simply set with a determined scowl. Eventually the primarch of the Ultramarines returned to his chair.

'What will you do next?' he asked.

'I do not need starships to scour Illyrium,' the Lion replied.

The flicker of fires lit the inside of the gutted buildings of Thiaphonis. Where had once been tax offices, logistaria halls and the trade forum, now stood a shanty of bivouacs. Many citizens had left, braving the storms to head south to the foothills, or east to the sprawling encampments a kilometre or two inside the picket of the Dark Angels.

Tobias Pullis would not give up Illyria so easily, not to the traitors of the civitas and certainly not to off-worlder thugs. Even after the shelling, he had stayed. Life in the ruins of Thiaphonis was preferable to the humiliation of living on the dubious charity of Macragge Civitas. Here he was able to help others, the few thousand that remained. Metre by metre they would rebuild the town, with their bare hands when the fuel ran out. He wanted nothing from the city of Guilliman.

He wrapped his mantle about his face and stood up, his space next to the fire quickly filled by Jerostius, freshly returned from his watch duty. From the broken window of the former scriptorium, he looked out across the broken remains of the stronghold that had been dropped on the town. The flare of arc-cutters was bright as the reclamation parties did their best to break up the huge construction during a lull in the snows. Children worked together to haul sledges piled with pieces of scavenged girder and pillars of ferrocrete.

A distant shout drew his attention away from the window. It came closer, repeated by successive sentry posts – it was impossible to use any form of transmitted communication with the Legiones Astartes filling the airwaves with their jamming signals.

'Gunship incoming!' came the cry.

The men and women around the fire surged to their feet. Swaddled in poorly fitting clothes and tattered cloaks they made an unseemly group, but there were none that Tobias would rather have had at his back.

He led them into the adjoining storeroom where they snatched up lasguns and autorifles from the stacks against the wall. Brizantus and Nadora took up the launcher and the three precious rockets that had been passed to them by soldiers of the Illyrat Batha. Tobias led them up the stairs to the rooftop watch-point – an old maintenance hut that had been reinforced with bags and ration crates filled with stones.

The gunship could be clearly seen coming from the east, black against the clouds.

‘Angels of the Lion,’ muttered Jerostius.

Tobias said nothing as the Thunderhawk slowed to a hover above the Square of Tertius. He heard metal scrape on metal and glanced back to see Nadora loading Brizantus’ rocket launcher.

‘No,’ he whispered. ‘That’ll barely scratch a gunship.’

‘What do we do?’ asked Bazerian, clutching his lasgun tightly across his chest. He looked at the gunship as though it were the apparition of death itself.

‘Nothing,’ Tobias told them. ‘It’s the first we’ve seen of these dogs in days. Lie low, give them no reason to stay.’

The gunship descended, turning snow to steam with its jets. Tobias could see down the Via Occidentis, all the way to the shattered remains of what had been the textile market. Galderick and his squad would be there, and Salumon’s guerrillas beneath the arches of the main viaduct. The gunship seemed to be settling perfectly between the three waiting rebel groups.

Surrounded by swirling vapour, the Thunderhawk landed. The ramp opened and a lone figure stepped out, clad in ebon power armour. Gold decoration glittered in the light from inside the gunship.

He carried a broad axe in one hand, its head shaped like an hourglass.

‘Just one?’ Brizantus laughed, hefting the launcher to his shoulder. Tobias held up his hand.

‘Wait…’

A distant series of dull thuds echoed along the valley. Tobias moved to the bunker’s horizontal slit and saw clouds of smoke issuing from positions across the mouth of the valley. Two seconds later, the scream of descending projectiles sent him sprinting for the stairwell.

Some of the others made it off the roof, throwing themselves down the steps behind Tobias as the first rocket struck. The whole scriptorium lurched, hurling him down the metal stairs, Castorius and Bazerian landing on top of him.

The roof disappeared in a sheet of white flame and debris rained down the steps after the rebels. Winded, Tobias could barely move, pushing at Bazerian to get up.

The flames did not dissipate, but turned a pale blue, licking at the edge of the roof entrance. Mesmerised, Tobias watched as a drip of burning liquid fell onto the first step. Against all expectation, rivulets started to form, moving quite deliberately over the metal, vapour burning with cerulean flame. Step by step they descended towards the Illyrians.

‘Phosphex!’ snarled Tobias, rolling to his feet.

The building shuddered again as another rocket slammed into the eastern wall below them, punching through the brick to spray more of the deadly fire across the interior. The flame coming down the stairs flowed faster, the heat prickling at Tobias' neck as he and the others tried to make the next landing.

Phosphex boiled up from below, impossibly leaping from step to step as the flame ascended, as if guided by a sentient homicidal intent. Castorius screamed when his woollen jerkin caught fire, flailing as blue flames seared his face.

There was no smoke but the phosphex was eating the air, choking Tobias. He fell to his knees, tripping Castorius as he stumbled down the steps. In moments he was engulfed by fire, clothes consumed, skin and flesh stripped to blackening bones while Tobias watched in horror. Behind him, Bazerian shrieked and then fell silent.

It was impossible to breathe, and Tobias' last scream was sucked from his lungs. As he tried to take a final breath the phosphex leapt into his open mouth and incinerated him from the inside.

Farith Redloss turned and called back to Danaes. His second-in-command was coordinating the phosphex strike at the main communications panel.

'Signal the Lord Protector. We have commenced pacification.'

The voted successor of the Dreadwing nodded solemnly.

'We have come,' the warrior intoned slowly. 'We are death.'

Stepping back up the ramp, Redloss smiled while Thiaphonis was engulfed by flame.

TWENTY-TWO

A testing time

Caliban

For several hours Luther had laboured over the specific arrangement and choreography of the triumphal feast. It was an endeavour requiring attention to detail only previously encountered during the planning of his wedding to Fyona.

He didn't want to think about his wife, not now. She had died during the birth of their first child, along with their daughter, just two years after their nuptials. Half a year later, Luther had stumbled upon a feral boy in the forest. What might have happened, had the Lion been raised with a mother and sister?

Possibilities. They had plagued his thoughts of late.

Standing upon the path to a new future, an abyss of destruction on either side, had turned his mind to the past more frequently than in the previous fifty years.

What if he had allowed the Saroshi to kill the Lion?

What if he had not relinquished the Grand Mastery of the Order?

What if he had not saved that boy in the woods?

Regrets? No. The only true regrets were for actions not taken. He had no plans to regret the next few hours and days. The universe, and Corswain's naïvety, had delivered an opportunity to Luther, one that he had to seize.

He kept these turbulent thoughts deep, always ready with a smile or quip for those around him.

'I am sure that the small comforts of Caliban have been sorely absent these past years,' he said to his neighbours at the head table – Belath on his right, Griffayn on the left. Belath picked at his plate, eating little. Griffayn appeared relaxed, in occasional conversation with those around him, quick to smile.

Beyond the – supposedly *former* – voted lieutenant of the Firewing sat Lord Cypher. On the other side of the Chapter Master the chair was occupied by Saulus Maegon, Mistress of the Angelicasta. Like Luther she was augmented to be more powerful and longer-lived than any normal human, and her appetite matched her enlarged physique. There were two other officers from the transport fleet, lieutenants both, who ate heartily from the platters before them. Asmodeus sat to the far right, stroking his chin thoughtfully, physically present but mentally absent.

The rest of Belath's command sat at the trenchers along two tables perpendicular to the Grand Master's. It was a ludicrously small gathering for the massive space of the Hall of Decemial, but Luther wanted his guests to feel as comfortable as possible with their surroundings.

'Grand Master, might I ask a question?' Griffayn asked suddenly.

'By all means, feel free to ask whatever you wish,' Luther replied.

'While it is an honour to be feasted in this fashion, I have noticed the absence of several of your senior officers. Astelan, for instance. And your Librarian, Brother Zahariel. I do not see them.'

'Master Astelan attends to the marshalling of the troops for your relief force, Sergeant Griffayn.'

'A ponderous task for one of his rank and experience,' said the voted lieutenant.

'Yet one from which he could not be prised, like a limpet on a rock,' Luther continued smoothly. 'Astelan has several faults, but laziness is not one of them. Overly prideful, perhaps, which explains why he insists on leading the recruits into orbit.'

The lie came so easily. Unrehearsed, natural, becoming truth the moment it fell from his lips. Luther had once worried how easily he spilled the half-truths and deceptions, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that he served a higher truth with such manipulation.

'As for my Librarians, and other officers, you have somewhat pre-empted me with your observational skills, Griffayn.'

Luther stood and held out his arms, attracting the attention of all in the hall. The chatter of conversation and clatter of bowls and plates quietened and then vanished altogether.

There was movement on the galleries overlooking the feast – one hundred Space Marines clad in black assembled on each, their bolters presented to the troops below.

'Hail our conquering heroes!' the two hundred Space Marines declared, their external voxes filling the hall with echoes for several seconds. 'Hail!'

'Brothers,' Luther declared, when the noise had quietened, 'welcome back to Caliban! By ancient tradition, the greatest honour I can bestow upon returning heroes is for the Grand Master and his captains to serve upon those that have been brought home on the tides of war. So it was in the oldest days of Aldurukh, as it will be today. Regardless of rank or deeds, to the warriors of Caliban that have waited for your return, each of you is a hero beyond measure, and this feast is our tribute to you.'

Waiting by the open doors, Zahariel heard these words and acknowledged their signal with a nod to the Grand Master. As Luther picked up a pitcher of wine

from the table and turned to Belath, the Master and his Mystai entered, each accompanied by two officers of centurion rank, one of each pair bearing a salver with gold goblets and silver cups upon it, the other holding a huge jug of wine. They wore the surcoats of neophytes over their armour, especially sewn by serfs that afternoon, one of many details insisted upon by Luther.

Zahariel could not match the Grand Master's sense of theatre, but admitted to himself that the effect was of noble officers humbly presenting themselves to their peers.

'Drink deep of Caliban's grape, you shall not know the like again for many years!' Luther declared, pouring red wine for Belath before turning to Griffayn.

The Mystai split, heading for the two tables, Zahariel leading one group, Vassago the other. They moved to the closest occupants.

'Wine for the returning hero,' Zahariel said quietly as he arrived at the first Space Marine's shoulder.

'In centuries past,' said Luther, 'when knights of the Order rode out into the dark forests to confront the Great Beasts or to wage war on the lesser authorities, it was customary on the eve of their departure to hold a funeral banquet. They were never expected to return, and in hearing their eulogies would not hold back in battle.'

He paused and looked at Belath. Zahariel slipped his mind free from its mortal tethers, riding the pulse of Caliban's power into the periphery of the closest legionary's thoughts. As Luther continued, the Master of the Mystai picked up fleeting thoughts, images and impressions, from the mind of the Space Marine.

'Many decades ago, we all departed this green world to fight in the Crusade of the Emperor, bringing the Imperial Truth to a benighted galaxy. Some of us spent only a little time on that noble endeavour, but you have given your lives to that cause. Just as when the knights set out to confront the Great Beasts not expecting to return, you trod your last steps on beautiful Caliban's soil without thoughts of coming back.'

Mention of Caliban brought greater responses than those of the Emperor and the Great Crusade. Zahariel detected a surge of memory and loyalty when Luther spoke of leaving Caliban.

He picked up a golden cup from the tray carried by Master Adarthian and placed it in front of the Space Marine from Belath's flotilla. Captain Vastobal filled the goblet and they moved to the next warrior.

'This was the place of your birth, but as Dark Angels it was not your home. That lay upon starships and far-flung warzones across the breadth of the known stars and the shadowed abysses between. It is a shame that you departed Aldurukh without that ancient ritual, but perhaps it would have been untimely. We had not yet discovered who we truly were. The stuff of eulogies, the tales of

heroism and honour, were to be made out in the stars, not in the forests of Caliban.'

'Wine for the hero,' Zahariel murmured, skimming the outermost thoughts of the next warrior.

This one responded more when Luther spoke of the Dark Angels, his thoughts returning again and again to the Legion icon upon the shoulder of the Space Marine sitting opposite. Zahariel plucked a silver goblet from Adarthian's salver and placed it on the table.

'I send another thirty thousand sons of Caliban into a war that has no equal. The Space Marine Legions have fallen into conflict with one another. The galaxy is in flames and my brother Corswain calls upon me to lend aid.'

Zahariel had always respected Luther's power of oratory, but he was impressed even more by his verbal dexterity. As the Mystai moved through the host, the Grand Master spun a speech that encompassed everything from the Emperor to the serfs in the kitchens. Against this, Zahariel was able to measure the reactions of the assembled Dark Angels, gauging which felt more closely attached to Caliban and those that drew their identity from the Lion and the Legion.

To those favourably disposed towards Luther's speech, a golden cup was given. To those that reacted poorly, a silver goblet.

In this way, the loyalty of the feasters was marked.

When Zahariel and his companions were done – save for those at the head table, too close to Asmodeus for any psychic probing to remain undetected – the Master of the Mystai and other officers withdrew to one side, passing the salvers to serfs of Aldurukh.

Luther continued for another couple of minutes and then drew his speech to a close. He gestured towards the doors and more attendants entered, bearing with them fresh platters of food.

'Feast, my brothers, and celebrate! We await the dawn and a fresh coming of day. There come upon us great woes, but also great hope. We must face these challenges, each to his honour as he judges it. As the metal of a sword is not tested until it is swung, so the mettle of our loyalty goes unknown until it is strained.' The Grand Master looked at Griffayn and then back to the assembled Space Marines. 'Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.'

TWENTY-THREE

No relent

Ultramar

Illyrium burned.

The ruin of towns and cities belched forth a pall of smoke and ash, swathing the mountains with permanent gloom. The glow of phosphex pyres added a hellish tinge to the twilight, painting the dark clouds with incandescent fury. As the winter blizzards worsened it snowed black on the lower slopes. In the highlands the Dreadwing razed the trees of the silva altum, unleashing thousands of defoliant shells and missiles to turn hundreds of square kilometres of pristine forest to putrefying swamp.

Over the past few weeks many thousands of Illyrians had been forced out of their homes by the advance of Redloss and his warriors, herded to the massive internment camps growing in the foothills bordering the neighbouring regions. While the Deathwing guarded Macragge Civitas and the Dreadwing brought destruction to Illyrium, the rest of the Lion's sons patrolled the encampments, quelling all dissent, rooting out the demagogues and terrorists that tried to slip away from the onslaught.

By the direct order of the Lion, summary executions were carried out against any found to possess a weapon. Criminal gangs had already started to infiltrate the camps, those with the means to move and conceal weapons able to threaten those that could not. Though supplies were regularly dispensed by columns from the south, many shipments were smuggled away as soon as they entered the camps, either stolen outright or siphoned back to the remaining resistance army by sympathisers.

After twenty-three days of unrelenting assault, Redloss had depopulated nearly two-thirds of Illyrium. He was keenly aware that the war against the rebels had barely begun, the mountain strongholds and extensive cave systems of the highlands more than enough to shelter tens of thousands of foes.

On receiving the pessimistic assessments of the Dreadwing's commander, the Lion left Macragge Civitas to intervene personally in the offensive. It was highly unorthodox for the primarch to interfere once one of the Wings had been deployed, but in practical terms there was nothing Farith Redloss could do but accept the presence of his gene-father with good grace.

The Lion took over Redloss' command post in the remnants of Andetrium on the lower slopes of the Alma Mons. Also known as the Gatepeak, Alma Mons was the key to taking the highlands. From its upper ridges and slopes, the Dark Angels would be able to advance into the inner valleys beneath a storm of long-range firepower.

Before the shattered walls of Andetrium's old senate house the Dark Angels erected a marcher keep, a facsimile of Aldurukh ten storeys high, festooned with communications systems, scanning arrays and devastating weaponry. It dominated the ragged skyline of Andetrium, as much a testament to the Dark Angels' intent as a military necessity.

On the upper level the Lion held his headquarters, recreating his audience chamber from the *Invincible Reason*, including bringing his ebon throne down from orbit. From this lofty hall he analysed every piece of incoming intelligence and plotted the next stages of the suppression with the precision of a watchmaker. There was not a Land Speeder patrol, nor supply column nor squad advance that was not ordered by the primarch.

'Nobody has ever gone up there, my liege,' Redloss told the Lion when he was summoned to council. He had taken with him Danaes and a few others of the Dreadwing leadership, but it was not their place to speak. He was the voted lieutenant, he was the voice of the Dreadwing. 'Even the relative handful of Ultramarines from Illyrium are lowlanders, considered traitors by their mountain cousins. Orbital surveyance is patchy at best, and the storms are too much of a risk to gunships. I'm sure if we had brought more of the Ravenwing with us we could spy out their holes and nooks, but with the resources to hand…'

'We knew that it would come to this,' said the Lion. 'From the outset the Alma Mons would be their stronghold.'

'More than a hundred kilometres of caves and tunnels, fortified since Old Night, held by several thousand dedicated rebels.' Redloss scratched his chin. 'Do we think Curze is in there? If he isn't, I'd rather leave the Illyrians there to rot. If we could use orbital weapons I would crack the mountain open and have done with it. Could you perhaps approach the emperor again, my liege?'

The Lion scowled at such honest but negative talk. Redloss ploughed on, emboldened by the knowledge that his primarch had brought him and the Dreadwing to Imperium Secundus to use their expertise and listen to his perspective.

'From the orders of the Imperator Regis himself, our mission is to eliminate the Night Haunter, my liege, not end the Illyrian uprising.' Redloss gestured for Danaes to approach with a handheld hololith. The Dreadwing officer placed it on the floor of the hall and a three-dimensional render of the Gatepeak sprang into red-and-orange life before the throne. Flashing runes highlighted detected

fortifications, more than twenty of them, while bright green ribbons delineated the accessible routes onto the higher slopes.

‘The harder we fight, the more resistance we create, my liege,’ Redloss continued. ‘A hundred a day, five hundred a day, it’s impossible to tell how many sympathisers our occupation is creating.’

‘Sympathisers,’ the Lion said heavily. ‘Not fighters.’

‘Not many of them, no, my liege. But we fight the mountain as much as the men, and while outsiders sustain them they will hold.’

‘And you would prefer not to fight the mountain?’ said the Lion. He leaned forward, one elbow on his knee, chin on fist as he stared at the slowly rotating display.

‘Exactly, my liege. If we are to assume Curze is masterminding the defence, we can expect incessant suicide attacks, ambushes, feints, counter-assaults and an ever-present threat of harassment from the native populace behind us. We will pay a bloody toll for every step up that mountain.’

‘And Curze will slip away at the last moment,’ concluded the primarch.

‘That is my worry, Lord Protector,’ said Redloss. ‘Even at best estimates we would lose hundreds of legionaries without any guarantee of achieving our mission.’

‘I assume that you did not come to me simply with concerns and worries,’ the Lion said. He sat back, eyebrows raised. ‘Proposals? Plans?’

‘We are death.’ Redloss signalled Danaes, who activated the next stage of the hololithic presentation. A cloud of tiny blue lights seemed to drift down onto the mountain like snow, settling in cyan swathes. It was followed by several pinpoints of white and the mountains were lit from within by a pale yellow glow. ‘We can set up a picket across all of the major lines of access and escape, and use orbital-seeded deathwinds, vortex detonators and guardian minefields to cut off any other exit.’

‘Can you ensure that the encirclement will be complete?’

‘If we use the resources of the whole fleet, and a few hundred deathstorm pods I happen to know the Ultramarines possess, supplemented by gunship-dropped motion-activated cluster ordnance, tarantula and rapier batteries. In the lower reaches we can conduct Land Speeder and Thunderhawk interdictions too.’

‘We seal the Alma Mons, letting nothing in or out. A sterile battlefield.’

‘Yes, my liege. We bring in the two Dreadhammers being carried on the *Forgivable Aggression*, along with the eighty-four void shells we can muster. The Dreadhammers lead the advance, punching a hole in whatever strongholds we encounter. We then deploy the Caestus assault rams into the breaches.’

‘This seems like a lot of work simply to pave the way for an aerial infantry assault.’

Redloss smiled.

‘If the assault rams were carrying legionaries, my liege, I would agree. We can bring together forty-eight Caestus in total, and pack each one with rad-bombs and phosphex shells.’

‘You are turning manned missiles back into torpedoes?’

‘Piloted bombs, my liege. Not forbidden by Lord Sanguinius’ ruling. We also have enough rad-missiles and promethium to turn three hundred drop pods into guided ordnance.’

‘Drop pods must be deployed from orbit, little brother. The Imperator Regis forbade attack from orbit.’

Redloss looked at his companions and then back to his primarch.

‘Most will be servitor-piloted drones. There are several dozen heavily wounded brothers of the Dreadwing that would be happy to give their last effort to the cause in this manner. We can slave the other systems to the legionary-guided craft. To everyone else it will look like an infantry drop, my liege.’ He took a step closer and dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘We won’t tell Guilliman if you won’t, Lord Protector.’

The Lion considered the proposal in silence for several minutes, his gaze moving from Redloss to the hololith to the other members of the Dreadwing and back to the display.

‘Long-term environmental effects?’

‘Phosphex and rad-pollution will render central Illyrium completely uninhabitable for about six to eight hundred years.’ Redloss kept his tone impassive, but secretly the thought of rendering such devastation gave him a thrill. ‘If such concerns are a factor, I submit that Holguin and his warriors might be better suited to the task.’

He thought that he had gone too far at that moment, an instant of flippancy that might be taken as arrogance, assumption even. The Lion’s eyes narrowed and Redloss prepared himself for the inevitable rebuke.

‘None of this guarantees the death of Curze,’ said the primarch.

Redloss deflated, the primarch’s words robbing him of any triumph.

‘There are no guarantees, my liege,’ he heard himself say before he could stop.

The Lion stood up and approached the hololith, oblivious to Farith’s platitudes. Redloss wondered at the thought processes turning his master’s mind at the time. What labyrinthine possibilities did they explore?

‘It is a good plan,’ said the Lion, sending a surge of relief and excitement through Redloss. It was almost unnatural how much he delighted in the praise of his primarch even after so many years of service. ‘However, it needs one small adjustment.’

‘My liege?’

‘It shall be as it was on the *Invincible Reason*. When you have cleansed the Gatepeak, withdraw and seal the mountain tight.’ The Lion closed a fist, his gaze distant. ‘Then I shall hunt.’

PENTAE

TWENTY-FOUR

Taking control

Caliban

The Stormbird was swallowed by the cavernous landing bay of the transport, passing into a space designed to accommodate ten such drop-ships. It settled on the decking amidst a last flurry of plasma plumes, bathing plasteel with an azure glow.

Astelan stepped onto the descending ramp, picking up fresh lubricant and disinfectant through the olfactory sensors of his power armour. Notes of polish and the smallest vestige of human sweat completed the input.

‘Someone has been cleaning up for us,’ he said to Galedan. ‘Working hard, by the smell of it.’

The inner doors clanked open on heavy gears, wide enough to admit ten Space Marines abreast. A phalanx of serfs entered, dressed in grey carapace armour and vambraces over black coveralls, bearing a mixture of lasweaponry and shotguns. They formed up in lines of twenty to one side of the bay, weapons presented as a guard of honour.

‘You must be Deck-Captain Tagrain,’ Astelan addressed the officer leading the corps of unaugmented troops. The rest of the Stormbird’s complement arrayed themselves to either side of the First Master, fifty Space Marines armed with boltguns and a variety of more specialist weaponry.

‘Master Astelan.’ The deck officer snapped a crisp salute and bowed. He gestured towards the inner bay doors. ‘Quarters have been assigned according to the manifest you sent. If your troops would like to follow Deck-Lieutenant Haster, he will show them the way.’

‘My warriors are well acquainted with the layout of this vessel, deck-captain.’ Astelan turned to address the Space Marines on his right. ‘Lieutenant-Commander Vael!’

The officer stepped out of the line and raised a fist to his chest.

‘First Master?’

‘Take two squads and secure the command bridge of this ship.’

‘Master?’ Tagrain looked aghast at the Space Marines that fell in beside Vael. ‘We received no communication of a change of command.’

‘You are receiving it now, deck-captain. Inform your crew that if they resist, my warriors have standing orders to eliminate any opposition. Galedan, pass the word to the other gunships, all forces are to secure the transports immediately. No delays.’

Galedan looked uncomfortable at this development but turned away to comply.

‘This is…’ Tagrain’s complaint wilted as Astelan stared down at him through the lenses of his helm.

‘Your consent is optional, Tagrain,’ the First Master told him quietly, not without a small measure of sympathy. ‘I would find somewhere else to be busy, if I were you. Dismiss your company before matters escalate.’

While Tagrain attended to heeding this advice, Galedan stepped close.

‘The order has been passed, First Master. All vessels will be seized without delay.’ He paused, weighing his next words. ‘No such command came from Luther, I would know it. Why the change of plan?’

‘Sar Luther is a man of honour, Master Galedan,’ Astelan replied. ‘He has values and principles to uphold. Such men can be manipulated, coerced and distracted. Belath will refuse Luther’s offer of alliance. He is also a man of principle, in this case the principle of doing the most idiotic thing at any given occasion. He will order his crews to fight and Luther lacks the stomach for such bloodshed. He would risk the freedom of his world for the lives of a few serfs. While the debate rages, it would take only a short signal from the ground to send the fleet back into the void. I would remove that option from Belath.’

‘You ignored the Lion’s orders, so that you could protect civilian lives, which earned us the primarch’s ire in the first place. Why so sanguine about innocent casualties now? You are disobeying Luther to do the opposite. Are we not men of honour and principle too?’

‘Not when it is too costly. Sometimes we must do a painful thing, receive a slighter injury, to avoid a greater wound.’

The deck throbbed with the arrival of more gunships. Astelan turned on his heel and marched back up the ramp of the Stormbird, Galedan striding to keep up.

‘We’re not staying?’ said the Chapter Master.

‘I have seen the full fleet orders,’ said Astelan. Arriving in the troop bay of the gunship he activated the internal communicator and addressed the pilot. ‘Maythius, rendezvous with Master Awain’s reserve group and direct them to the battle-barge.’

‘Affirmative, First Master.’

‘What battle-barge?’ Galedan’s confusion brought Astelan a perverse sense of delight. ‘There’s a battle-barge?’

‘Sar Luther, for reasons known only to himself, kept its identity a secret. Belath didn’t arrive on a transport, he commanded a warship as escort, which is not

unreasonable. A friend in the orbital scanning relays picked up the sensor returns and passed its location to me.'

'A friend?'

'I have lots of friends.' Astelan closed the ramp and moved towards the seating bays near the Stormbird's aft section. 'My friend also decoded an identifier signal. The ship is the *Spear of Truth*.'

'Our old ship?' Galedan shook his head. 'How did it…?'

'My old command, given to *me* by the Emperor. The Lion took it from me at Zaramund. The primarch or that halfwit Corswain must have passed it on to Belath. Who can say what that fawning moron did with his own ship.'

Astelan's hands formed fists as he sat on the bench.

'Perhaps Luther thought to make it his flagship,' he continued. He looked at Galedan. 'I am taking back my ship, old friend. Are you with me?'

TWENTY-FIVE

Haunted knight

Ultramar

The ring of the Lion’s footfalls sounded abnormally loud on the ramp of the Stormbird. The mountain was quiet, the only sound the purr of the gunship’s idling jets and the sighing of the wind over the snowy ground. The storm was strengthening, the snow coming in thicker flurries, stained dirty grey by the ash that fell with it. Overhead the clouds were almost black, underlit by an orange gleam, as though the Alma Mons had become a volcano.

It was not lava that lit the storm. Burning promethium, phosphex and radiation turned the night into twilight, glowing from the gaping wounds rent into the mountain by the assault of the Dreadwing. Suffused with light from within, the Gatepeak looked like an enormous feast candle, its tip shrouded in a multicoloured fog.

Looking back, the Lion could see the cordon half a kilometre behind, further down the slope. Redloss stood atop the roof of his Spartan transport, axe held up in salute. More tanks barred the highway descending to the foothills. Patrols of legionaries and Speeders criss-crossed the ravaged wilderness between the armoured sentry points.

Redloss had gone to great lengths to secure the mountain, and the Lion had even drafted in some of the non-Dreadwing warriors that had been stationed on the border of Illyrium. It made no difference. If Curze wanted to escape, he would find a way. Had not the Night Haunter been able to flee the *Invincible Reason* though the battle-barge had been locked down, at combat readiness in the vacuum of orbit above Macragge?

As much as the Lion knew Curze could slip through the net any time he wanted, the Dark Angel also knew that his foe would not. There was a reason the primarch of the First Legion stepped out openly on the main highway, announcing his arrival by Stormbird as though a fanfare had pealed and a thousand Space Marines had hailed his name.

He wanted Curze to know that he was coming for him.

Alone.

Vulnerable.

At least to Curze's mind. It was a challenge. A mirror to the invitation Curze had issued, when he had suggested parley at Tsagualsa.

On that occasion the Lion had allowed a delusion to enter his thinking – that Curze was redeemable. Even with the slaughter of Thramas on the bloody hands of the Night Haunter, the Lion had considered Konrad a wayward brother like Horus. Only when he had looked into the eyes of his foe, their hands around each other's throats, had he known the depths to which the traitors had been dragged.

There was no humanity left in Curze, no matter what Sanguinius thought. He was a mad animal, undeserving of anything less than death. His defiance of the Emperor, turning on his own brothers, had been a choice.

Whatever else had happened to the Night Haunter, he had always made choices. He could have chosen to treat equally with the Lion, to negotiate a settlement to their war to spare the lives of millions.

He had not, and one thing had been clear from the moment the Lion had looked into his eyes.

Konrad wants me dead. He has always wanted to kill me, for some perceived slight, or perhaps because though I have seen tragedy and darkness too, I chose to remain loyal. Am I the thing he hates about himself?

Very well. Meet me, if you dare.

So declared the Lion as he turned away from his warriors and started to ascend, the broken rubble of the road crunching beneath a layer of thickening snow. It was both simple and complex. Simple, insomuch that the Lion offered himself as bait. Complex, in that Curze would see the trap in moments.

The question was whether the Night Haunter thought he could kill the Lion.

He drew his blade, the Lion Sword. It gleamed with pale light, an artefact of Terran ingenuity that could slice through any armour. He had taken it from Redloss when he had confronted Curze in the castrum of Macragge Civitas alongside Guilliman. It seemed fitting to keep the blade until he had finished the job.

Leaving the cratered remains of the highway, the Lion cut north-east, towards the still-burning ruins of the first Illyrian outpost two kilometres away. The bluish flicker of fire lit the stone palisades and molten remnants of ferrocrete towers. The wind, brisk and gathering strength, brought the acrid taint of phosphex vapours.

Long strides took the Lion swiftly towards his goal.

From their encounter on Tsagualsa, the matter was undecided. Much depended on the exact manner, locale and timing of the attack. There was a chance, slim but possible, that the Lion would not see the strike that would slay him. If the conditions were perfect, if he hesitated at the wrong moment, Curze could end the Lion in a heartbeat.

The Lion was willing to back himself, his ability to sense the attack, to be alert to any danger and react without thought. He was also willing to wager his life on the belief that Curze did not want to kill him quickly. Where was the delight in victory over a foe already dead? Where was justification, vindication, when no one could hear your argument?

It was this more than his skill that the Lion thought would keep him safe. Curze's insanity would not let him simply strike and fade away. He had a point to prove.

It was worth the tiny risk. The point had been made that the better part of three Legions were tied to Macragge while Curze roamed free. To be rid of the Night Haunter would free the Lion to fulfil his role as the Lord Protector – command not just of the Dark Angels, but of all the military forces of the Imperium.

Sanguinius would be emperor, Guilliman the architect of the new Imperium. The Imperator Regis was welcome to the plaudits and adulation, the burden of responsibility. Guilliman would command an army of bureaucrats, senators and lawmakers. The Lion would be the general of the Imperium's armed forces, a new… He hesitated to bring the rank to mind, but could not stop himself.

A new Warmaster.

Such was the prize he called to mind. Sanguinius' vision of death would not come to pass while the Lion wielded such terrible might. The Triumvirate would be the match of the Emperor-lost, the power and majesty of mankind's saviour renewed. He would take the fight to Horus at the forefront of the Legions – the finest augmented warriors dedicated to the most beloved of the primarchs, recruited, organised, trained and armed by the greatest logistician in the galaxy, commanded by its paramount general. Horus and his ragtag entourage of misfits and dissidents would be shown the true strength of the Imperium.

Such glory awaited, if he could but rid the new Imperium of its troublesome foe. A motivation far beyond simple revenge, that spurred the Lion on with every stride.

Yes, that was a goal certainly worth a few risks.

The ruined stronghold was little more than a hole in the mountainside now. Plasma and void weapons had gouged out the surface defences, like the claws of a cudbear breaking open earth to get at verminites below. Craters both smooth and rugged, cracked stone and phosphex-scorched earth surrounded the broken castle.

Nearing cover from which Curze could attack, the Lion slowed, concentrating on his senses. Sight, sound and smell brought a plethora of sensations, none of them pleasant. The breach of the fortress was choked with the dead, those manning the outer defences when the first rad-bombs had landed. They were mostly intact, save those that had been broken apart by the fall of rubble. Their

skin had sloughed off, eyes burst, exposed arteries and veins shredded. To the Lion's eyes the bodies almost sparkled with radiation, a miasma that hung low across the ruins, still close to where the bombs had detonated.

Other senses were at full stretch. The Lion liked to call it his instinct, but he knew it was more than that. It was the sensation that had guided him through the forests of Caliban, warning when one of the Great Beasts or the nephilla were nearby. It was the tingle he felt in close proximity to his brothers, the skin-shredding sensation he had encountered when he had first met the Emperor.

It was the surest way to find Curze, who was riddled with the spoor of warp-taint. It had been so strong before, in the lower decks of the *Invincible Reason*, it had been of no use. Out here in the wilderness, far away from other minds, Curze's presence would be much easier to find.

Standing on the edge of a glass-sided plasma scar, the Lion crouched, closing his eyes. He tilted his head, letting the environment seep into him through every pore. The slightest sound, the nuances of smell, the sensation of death permeated him.

Curze was not here.

He had not expected a confrontation this early. The Night Haunter would delight in being hunted as much as being the hunter – the matching of wits.

The snow was getting thicker and thicker, the wind now close to a gale. Night was still a few hours away, but darkness shrouded the slope of the Alma Mons. Curze would be watching, waiting.

If he got bored…

It was too soon. This was not the place.

The Lion stood and opened his eyes. Time to move on to the next ambush site.

He made his way up the mountain, moving through the ashen remains of pine forests and along defiles and gorges thick with the corpses of birds and animals caught on the periphery of the devastating assault. In places there were human cadavers too – some single, others in groups. Some had bolter wounds, a few bore plasma scars but most were rad-victims. They had tried to flee.

Had some of them been innocent? It seemed unlikely, albeit even if unwillingly, that everyone on the Gatepeak had supported the dissidents in one way or another. As the Lion had told Guilliman, compliance had its cost and it was not always paid by the guilty. He had annihilated armies and then agreed peace terms with their rulers. Like the Emperor before him, the Lion could not afford to count the price, only the prize. Billions – trillions – of lives depended on the strength of Imperium Secundus. It was vanity to pretend that individuals mattered against such overwhelming numbers.

The other lairs of the Illyrians were as empty of life as the first. Now and then he thought he caught an echo of Curze's presence, like the scat of a wolf that has

been scavenging the kills of larger prey.

The Night Haunter had doubtless been examining the work of the Dreadwing. Did he hope to learn something about the Lion from such examination, or was it simply curiosity or, most likely, perverse fascination?

The gloom of smoke became twilight proper and still the snow and ash fell. Here on the upper slopes the damage was less severe. More than eight kilometres above sea level, no unaugmented human could live for long without apparatus or a sealed environment. Even the Illyrians, famed for their resistance to altitude, could not function on the highest slopes of the Alma Mons. The Dreadwing had hunted down the relative few that had made it to their pressurised camps, more than capable of meting out vengeance with conventional weapons.

Twilight gave way to dusk, barely noticed, and then night fell and pitch blackness enveloped the mountain. What light crept through the clouds and smoke, reflected from the constant fall of ash and snow, was more than enough for the Lion's enhanced vision. Like the auto-senses of his little brothers, he could see far beyond the spectrum of normal humans.

The ash cloud glowed with residual radiation, a combination of heat from the plasma missiles and promethium, and more dangerous wavelengths unleashed by the rad-grenades and bombs of the Destroyer units. It had no colour that he could describe to a mortal, but in his mind's eye the ground and sky shimmered with silver and gold, flecks of phosphex-tainted ember gleaming with a sparkling ruby tint. Rocks, corpses, the blade of the Lion Sword: all glowed with radiant otherlight.

He headed back below the death zone, knowing exactly where he was going and what would happen when he got there. His heart started to race in anticipation of the confrontation he knew was fast approaching.

It was an ancient temple structure, its location well hidden in what had once been a broad pine forest. The trees were petrified now, caught by the blast of the Dreadwing's terrible weapons. As he approached, the Lion reached out a hand, the fingers of his gauntlet closing around a bough as thick as a man's thigh. It crumbled easily in his grasp, showering stone needles to the floor.

The stone trees gave way to a circle of broad columns, which supported a domed roof about four metres high. The pillars looked at first to be arranged haphazardly, placed by no sane architect, leaving no clear path to the centre. All was darkness within, just the ambient glow of background radiation to light the stepped concentric levels that led down like an amphitheatre.

The Dark Angels had discovered the temple the previous night. The Illyrians had tried to hold it, but compared to the fortress dug into the mountain's heart it was not defensible. They had died defending their profane house, fighting to the death rather than abandon the temple. Their bodies were piled five deep in places

where they had physically hurled themselves at the Dreadwing and died by the score.

The Lion’s armour sounded a soft chime in his right ear.

One second to midnight.

TWENTY-SIX

Awkward questions

Macragge

The atmosphere in the audience hall was frosty, and not just because of the winter weather. Holguin stood to attention, his long blade on a hanger at his right, helmet under his left arm. Sanguinius watched him carefully from his throne, fingers interlocked beneath his chin, elbows on the massive chair.

Guilliman was more animated, leaning forward, fingers gripping the arms of his throne. Beside him, Valentus Dolor stood with arms crossed, studying Holguin as intently as the two primarchs.

‘It has been two days since we received a formal report from Illyrium,’ Guilliman said, as stern as any schoolmaster. ‘What little we hear is not encouraging.’

‘I have received no word from my brothers, lord,’ Holguin replied.

‘I wonder why that might be,’ Guilliman said. ‘Is it possible that my brother keeps you uninformed so that you can stand dumb before us without dishonour?’

‘All things are possible, lord.’ Holguin accepted the scorn of the Lord Warden without rancour. He had known for some time that the Lion had called on the Deathwing to protect the castrum not simply because of their skill, but also because Holguin was amongst the most diplomatic of his staff officers. Even so, he would not let Guilliman cast aspersions against the Lion when his liege was not present to defend himself.

‘It is also possible, lord,’ said the voted lieutenant, ‘that my liege is engrossed in prosecuting the final defeat of the Illyrians, and too occupied to dispense blow-by-blow accounts to us here in the civitas.’

Sanguinius smiled. Guilliman did not.

‘The Lord Protector is not a power unto himself, he is accountable to the emperor.’ Guilliman stood up and took a step closer. Holguin held his ground though it was difficult in the face of the giant advancing on him. ‘He is the blade, Lord Sanguinius guides the hand.’

‘I am sure that is foremost in my liege’s thoughts, lord.’ Holguin kept his gaze steady, not directly meeting the stare of Guilliman but not really looking away. ‘He was despatched with the command to bring Curze to justice by all means short of orbital attack. He is complying with those orders.’

‘Orbital augurs suggest that our brother has been exceptionally vigorous of late,’ said Sanguinius, his humour gone. ‘Tens of thousands dead. Many more displaced, their homes and livelihoods destroyed.’

‘I am sure my lord emperor knew when he despatched my liege that his attention would be most thorough in this,’ said Holguin, as close to saying that Sanguinius should have known better as he would ever get. ‘Illyrium is non-compliant, and my liege brings it to compliance. I believe he knows exactly the terrible cost, but also the steeper price of failure. We cannot countenance dissent on the new throneworld of the Imperium.’

‘Would your liege rampage across Terra in such fashion?’ asked Dolor. ‘Or Caliban?’

Holguin matched the tetrarch’s stare.

‘Yes.’ He returned his attention to the Lord Warden. ‘I know that you think he pursues a personal vendetta against Curze, but my liege places *duty* at the forefront of his concerns.’

‘Is that so?’ Guilliman rubbed his forehead in agitation. ‘That was why, under guise of securing our borders, he secretly took his pursuit of Curze across the Five Hundred Worlds. What of duty then?’

‘A dozen worlds liberated from the grip of Lorgar’s and Angron’s vile sons,’ Sanguinius intervened, before Holguin could speak. ‘There might be cause for concern, but the Lion did not ignore the wars presented to him.’

‘I have overstated my case.’ Guilliman acquiesced to the will of the emperor with a solemn bow. ‘It is convenient, however, that the Lord Protector’s strategy in Illyrium inflamed the situation, giving him cause to move to such extreme measures. He did introduce the Dreadwing.’

‘With my permission,’ Sanguinius said. He glanced at Holguin and then Dolor, perhaps wondering whether to dismiss the Space Marines to continue his discussion. He evidently decided against it.

‘I know that you think I gifted the Lion this charter without proper consideration.’ The emperor stopped Guilliman’s protest with a sharp look and a raised hand. ‘Do us both the courtesy of not contesting that claim. You think, brother, and it is not a fault. You consider the theoretical and monitor the practical, honing your plans, redrafting and reworking everything you have created. If others of us had showed such circumspection, the galaxy might not be aflame with civil war.’

Guilliman accepted this praise in silence, brow slightly furrowed as though he expected a caveat to follow. He was right.

‘The Lion knows that Curze is a wild element, driven in ways we cannot imagine.’ Sanguinius looked away, gazing towards one of the high windows, lit

by pale sunlight. ‘I spoke to him, looked into his eyes. There is little humanity left there, and that which remains is quite, quite mad.’

‘I do not see how that excuses the razing of Illyrium. Does that not give Curze exactly the death and destruction he craves?’

‘It brings swift end, brother,’ the emperor said firmly, returning his gaze to Guilliman. ‘The Lion is right, this should never have been an issue. We are all at fault. The excision is painful, the surgery required.’

Guilliman took a deep breath. His eyes moved to Holguin.

‘Our orbital stations monitored a lot of activity yesterday,’ the Lord Warden said slowly. ‘Gunship launches and drop pod cascades, dozens of ships targeting the Alma Mons. Have you any comment?’

Holguin shook his head.

‘I know nothing, lord.’

TWENTY-SEVEN

The declaration

Caliban

All was arranged as he had planned. The goblets marking out those that would likely comply from those that might resist were in place, as were the Space Marines on the balconies above.

Luther was no stranger to reading the hearts of men, even Space Marines. Of those at the head table, Belath was still an obstacle, but not intractable. Griffayn's presence had caused some consternation at first, but Lord Cypher's subtle signals indicated that the ranking warrior of the Firewing would be a likely ally. The lower officers were clearly swayed by Griffayn, those that were fellow members of the Firewing.

Asmodeus… Who could say what guided the loyalties of the psyker. Zahariel had spent some time with the Librarian, and had reported on the encounter just before the banquet. Asmodeus was malleable, in the opinion of the Master of the Mystai. He was, like so many of his talent, open to the temptation of knowledge, and access to the library of the Mystai had proved to be a tantalising bribe. Even so, there was no way of telling for sure; Asmodeus kept his thoughts as well protected as any vault.

There was still time to win Belath to the cause. Astelan had spent considerable effort trying to persuade Luther that the Chapter Master was nothing but a lackey of the Lion, but his history with Belath could not be ignored. And if Belath could provide the ships without bloodshed, that was to be worth fighting for. Combined with Griffayn's backing, Luther might even be able to dispense with the Terran altogether.

To have loyal Calibanites at every level of the Order would make the secession a lot simpler.

A change in Belath's demeanour attracted Luther's attention. The Chapter Master had gone from a state of casual conversation to attentive tension in an instant, head slightly cocked and eyes narrowing – evidently he had a comm-bead in his ear.

Belath turned his gaze sharply on Luther, brow beetling.

'Is something wr–'

‘I have received a report that Astelan is commandeering my ships,’ snarled Belath. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

‘I gave no such command,’ Luther replied, masking his anger with a look of surprise. It was the truth, conveniently – a rare resource of late. ‘Astelan has exceeded his authority.’

‘Perhaps you have too, Master Luther,’ said Belath. His eyes cast around the hall suspiciously. ‘What is your intent?’

‘I tell you again, I gave Astelan no order to seize your ships. It appears that your personal antipathy has overpowered his reason.’

‘There will be consequences,’ Belath said.

‘There will,’ agreed Luther.

‘You will order Astelan and his warriors to stand down immediately,’ insisted the Chapter Master. ‘The transport fleet is under my command.’

‘That will be more difficult.’

‘Brothers!’ Belath called, surging to his feet. ‘Beware!’

The assembled company was slow to respond, taken unawares by the warning. Several Dark Angels rose, others looked around in confusion. The Space Marines overlooking the scene had not moved, thankfully. Luther had impressed upon them that they were to do nothing without an explicit order. The same ban had been laid upon Astelan, but he had ignored it.

‘Wait!’ demanded Luther, holding up his hands. He turned on Belath. ‘Do nothing in haste, Chapter Master, I beg you.’

‘You beg?’ Belath’s voice rose in pitch with incredulity.

‘Listen to the Grand Master.’ Griffayn’s voice was calm and deep. He remained seated, hands laid flat on the table.

‘I crave your indulgence, sons of Caliban,’ said Luther, inwardly cursing Astelan’s name. This was not how he had wanted to make his declaration. ‘I have something important to tell you all.’

Belath flexed his fingers in agitation but said nothing. Luther clasped his hands in front of his chest, exuding solemnity from every pore.

‘It is time that Caliban was liberated from the yoke of the Imperium.’

The words echoed for a couple of seconds. Silence followed. All eyes of the gathered Dark Angels were upon him, including those of his officers stood with Zahariel. His intent had been clear, but never overtly spoken.

Luther let free a half-smile. It felt good to finally give voice to the desires that he had held inside for so long. Uttering the words brought with it a sense of action, of a decision made. This was history turning, for good or bad.

Build bridges or burn them, that was his choice to make. Few were given the chance to choose. When the galaxy burned, why not turn the flames to your advantage?

‘It is a dream of mine, that Caliban and its sons and daughters be free. Not always has this occupied my thoughts, but of late it is an issue that has vexed me. When the Imperium arrived, I was as excited as any by the promise of a great future for our world. Technology, communication, trade. Protection. All of these things would make Caliban great. My son-brother, the Lion, learned of his place in the scheme of the universe. Learned that he was not of Caliban, not truly.’

‘The Lion has always been loyal to Caliban,’ Belath said, fists clenching.

‘I did not question his loyalty, simply his origins,’ Luther replied, accepting the interruption with a shrug. Not yet, he added to himself. ‘He grew up in the green forests but was not born of them, that cannot be disputed.’

Luther waited to see if Belath had anything else to say, but the Chapter Master simply clenched his jaw and ground his teeth.

‘Would a true son of Caliban have allowed the Imperium to rape our world? To raze the forests and build arcologies on the ruins of our cities? What true son of Caliban would have lauded this as progress, to see our ancient traditions washed away by the Imperial Truth, our noble history overwritten by the propaganda of remembrancers and the lies of Imperial Iterators?’

There was some reaction from those on the other tables, resentment in the expressions of some, doubt on the faces of others. At a glance, Luther judged that Zahariel’s sweep had been almost perfect. One or two with golden goblets appeared dubious, but none of the Space Marines marked with silver cups looked supportive. It was up to him to win them round. He knew that if any resisted, it would be his failure, despite his words to Lord Cypher earlier that day.

‘What is the measure of the lord that was sent to us? I called him son and brother, the closest of us all to his greatness, and was happy to dwell in his shadow. The Lion. I named him. Brought him from the wilds and gave him civilisation. Aldurukh took him as its own, not the Emperor, not the Imperium.

‘We hailed him as our saviour, and with him destroyed the Great Beasts. Was it for us that he launched his purge, or was it simply vengeance against the creatures that had hunted him in his infancy? No deed did he do for us that was not for his own betterment. The other knights he crushed, until there was only the Order. Dissension? Differences of opinion? These were unwelcome visitors to the court of Lion El’Jonson.’

‘You followed him as gladly as any other,’ called one of the Space Marines at the lower tables.

Thanks to the system of symbols upon his war-plate, Luther was able to read the man in a moment. His livery marked him out as a Tactical sergeant, his Legion badges showed him to be a member of the Second Chapter of the 23rd Order, a warrior drawn from the armoured companies of the Ironwing. Evidently not under the influence of Griffayn.

‘I followed him gladly, brother,’ answered the Grand Master. ‘Did we not all look to the light of his presence and take warmth from it? Did we not all ignore the darkness inside, bedazzled as one looks upon the sun though not caring that one is being turned blind? I admit my guilt, my errors. I layered civility and command and manners upon a beast of the woods, dressed it as a knight and called it lord. I gave up my rank, my title, to this creature.’

‘It is our gene-father you insult,’ Belath growled. ‘You are of the Legiones Astartes, but you are not a Space Marine. The blood of the Lion flows in the veins of all others here.’

‘Blood? Genetics? These are the things to which loyalty is paid?’ Luther caught himself as he was about to sneer. He wanted to be positive, to project a vision of greatness, not be drawn into petty squabbling.

The Grand Master took a breath and continued, refusing to rise to the debate.

‘Honour. Honour is the foundation upon which Aldurukh is built. We honour our liege lord and our duties to him. Yet he has duties too, but honours them not. Would a true lord of Caliban take the sons of his world, the best of its people, and turn them into warlords for another power? I am not a Space Marine, that is true. I was too old. Too sure in myself. Too independent.’

He saw that this elicited a few more frowns of consternation.

‘Who would steal whole generations of children for wars on distant worlds? Not for Caliban is that blood spilt. Each of you, I can see it in your eyes, has seen horrors the like of which I cannot imagine. The pain of civil war. The torment of seeing brothers slain, by those that you had thought also to be brothers.’

There was anguish, even in the eyes of Belath. This was it, this was the vein to be mined. Luther pressed on, his confidence renewed.

‘What part did Caliban play in this uprising? None. It is a creation of the primarchs, using the worlds of others as their battleground. They spill the blood of Caliban, the blood of Olympus, the blood of Baal Secundus and Macragge and even the blood of great Terra, in whose name genocide was wreaked upon the galaxy.’

A subtle change came about, almost unnoticed, but mention of the Great Crusade hardened expressions against Luther. He had to remember that these were veterans of those wars. Whatever the wrong or right of the cause, it was they that had conquered the galaxy. He could not cast them as villains in their own story. He quickly returned to his favourite subject.

‘Death and pain, sacrifice and blood, paid for by sons of Caliban to fight the wars of others. Not once has a foe threatened our world, but over the decades a quarter of a million of our sons have been taken from us. And what future heroes have been denied us, when the lineage of such warriors cannot be passed on?’ This was a delicate subject, but one that had to be raised, forestalling future

objections. ‘Do not tell me that the Lion was loyal to Caliban. The oaths we swore to him are no longer valid. No bond exists when the other side has broken the contract. Loyalty does not pass one way, it is exchanged.’

‘It is not your place to make demands of the primarch,’ said Belath, looking at Luther as though he were a piece of something left in the Angelicasta’s effluent filters. ‘It is no secret that you dishonoured yourself and were sent back to Caliban as a result. Even then, you disobeyed your lord. Some of us remember Zaramund.’

Again it was an effort not to respond to the jibe. Luther had to be above this. This could not be about him and his loyalty, it had to be about Caliban and its future. The insults were rendered meaningless in such a context and needed to be ignored.

‘I am confident in my honour, as you all should be. Can we say the same of the creature to whom we swore those oaths?’ As Luther addressed the Space Marines, he caught a glimpse of Zahariel in the corner of his eye. No more dedicated servant of the Lion had there once been, but now that connection had been shattered. ‘Should we not ask Brother Nemiel what loyalty the Lion paid him?’

There were sharp intakes of breath. There was no doubt that word of the deed had spread amongst the Legion, the truth of it distorted one way or the other. Luther looked at Belath.

‘Were you not there, the day the Lion raised his hand and struck down a son of Caliban for the sin of disagreement?’

Belath opened his mouth to respond but Luther continued on, raising his voice and turning away from the Chapter Master to address the rest of the audience. Belath was rapidly becoming a lost cause, but he could not let that pollute his intentions.

‘Brother-Redemptor Nemiel, appointed guardian of the hearts and minds of his brothers, the representative of the Emperor Himself.’ He glanced at Asmodeus. ‘Yes, we know of Chaplains and the breaking of the Librarius. Messengers came with the Emperor’s decrees from Nikaea. A decree that even the Lion has now seen fit to ignore. But Nemiel’s will was stronger than that – his honour, his bond forged of sterner stuff. And he died for that oath he swore, killed by the same jealous hand that had laid low all rivals on Caliban.’

He paused and took a long breath, continuing with lowered voice.

‘Was this not the hand that cast me aside, and many of your brothers, for a perceived slight? No explanation, no trial or evidence presented. Not even the good grace to make public accusations. You have been fed innuendo, rumour, gossip. No contending voices. No dissent. The Imperial Truth.’ Luther stepped away and walked around the table, turning his back on Belath to approach the

others as a comrade. He held out a hand, horizontal, palm up, the other held to his breast. ‘Chains thrown around Caliban, my brothers. Chains around you.’

‘You swore oaths to the Emperor also,’ Belath said from behind Luther. ‘Do you deny the sovereignty of the Master of Mankind?’

This was also dangerous ground, but could not be avoided. Luther raised a finger to his chin, thoughtful.

‘Where was the Emperor when Horus turned? What did the Emperor do when His favoured son, the Warmaster, the lord of lords, broke his oaths to the Imperium? Did He summon his Legion? Did He call upon the mighty First as he had done during the Unification Wars? No.’ Not one of the Space Marines present was a Terran, but such was the power of the Legion’s history, so strong had been the inculcation into the myth of the First Legion, that many were shaking their heads with displeasure. ‘Did the Emperor even set forth with a lesser Legion, and raise up His hand to strike His wayward son? No.’

He could see that his audience knew where his rhetoric was leading, but he was never one to shirk from delivering the definitive conclusion.

‘Did the Emperor even leave Terra?’

There it was. A subtle murmur from some, mouthed wordlessly by a few others. He did not need to say it himself.

‘No.’

Luther wished he could see Belath, but his attention was fixed on the rest of the Dark Angels. He stole a glance towards Zahariel and the others. They were ready, attention moving from Luther to the other Space Marines and back.

Feigning the need to relax, Luther rolled his shoulders and neck and turned back to the head table, his glance passing over Asmodeus. The Librarian sat with fingers steepled to his bottom lip, intent on the Grand Master.

That was good.

Zahariel heard only half of what Luther said. It was no small effort of will to maintain the grip he had on the minds of the Grand Master’s audience. There was no sign that Asmodeus was aware of the subtle aura Zahariel projected into the other Space Marines.

It was not the power he channelled that exhausted Zahariel – Caliban provided much through the minds of his disciples, he simply directed it. His fatigue came from the need to hold in check the ravening energy, maintaining control, letting it seep ever so gently into the minds of those that listened to Luther, keeping the flow slow enough to avoid detection by Belath’s Librarian.

Zahariel had not managed to lure the Librarian into the chamber of the Mystai, where the Ouroboros would have been able to set him free from the chains of the Emperor’s mental prison. Even so, Asmodeus had been open to the idea of a wider spectrum of study. Talents suppressed for so long by the Edict of Nikaea

had craved employment, and recent use of his psychic powers had left Asmodeus hungry to experience more, even if he did not realise it.

Even so, he would not react well to discovering Zahariel's part of the plan. Years of conditioning, decades of service could not be overturned by words alone. Luther held no illusions in that regard and had turned to Zahariel for assistance. Nor could they be swayed by psychic intervention alone, not without an overt intrusion that would elicit a counter-attack from Asmodeus. It was the combination of wordplay and mindplay that would turn the Dark Angels to Luther's cause.

'I will not follow Horus!' declared one of the Dark Angels.

'Nor I!' Luther replied instantly, shaking his head. 'I will not swap one tyrant for another. Caliban will be free, ruled only by its sons and daughters.'

'The Emperor is not a tyrant.' Zahariel did not catch where the voice came from, but it served Luther's purposes so well that he could have scripted it.

'No?' the Grand Master said as he rounded the end of the table. 'Is He not?'

Reclaiming his place between Belath and Griffayn, his positioning a declaration of authority, Luther leaned forward with fists on the dark wood.

'Prospero.'

One word whispered had the same effect as a dozen shouted. It was a word charged with potential. Luther left the Space Marines to their own thoughts for a few seconds, allowing them to conjure up whatever images the word entailed. Whatever thoughts they were, encouraged by images from Zahariel, the Dark Angels could not help but place Caliban into the position of Prospero for a moment.

'The world of Magnus and the Thousand Sons. The Emperor sent His dogs, the hounds of Fenris, leaving nothing but ruins and pyres.' Mention of the Space Wolves elicited even more of a reaction than that of the razed planet, though Zahariel did not know what had passed between the Legions for such bad feeling to fester. Every warrior reacted with indignation to the speech. Luther would be delighted, but he kept any triumphant tone from his voice. 'The Space Wolves, the Emperor's new weapon of choice. Barbarians who would slaughter a world of intellect and reason simply because they do not understand what it represents.

'And the lord that would despatch such a host? That is the nature of the Emperor. That is the nature of the Lion's master. And so it is the nature of the Lion. The pattern is clear. I raised him as best I could, but the Lion was lost to us the moment the Emperor came to Caliban. The true father, the true nature of his laboratory-created sons, came to the fore. Strife, rebellion, discord. Where now the Imperial Truth when dissent is all around?'

Even Belath looked uncertain. But Luther was not yet done. There was a final wound to inflict before the *coup de main* would be delivered.

‘The war has not yet come to Caliban, but it will. It must. How many worlds have fallen to disaster in recent years, though they thought they would be overlooked by the great powers that vie for the galaxy? Do not think that the Emperor is done with Caliban. Though storms eclipse the galaxy, whole systems sundered from each other, the Emperor has the will to send his spies to our world.’

This was met with some incredulity, but it was to be expected. A bold claim, for which Luther had no physical proof. Fortunately he did not need any.

‘I have witnesses, proud sons of Caliban that will testify to the intrusion. I held in a cell not a kilometre from where we are a son of another world sent as an agent of Terra. To what purpose? He would not say. And on that you must remember that you are not only responsible for what you say, but also for what you *do not* say. And if he could not say his purpose I must divine that it was not of good intent for Caliban.

‘What are we to make of these two things? Prospero burns and a spy of the Emperor comes to Caliban with secret purpose. Are we to ignore these things, claim them to be mere coincidence? Should we remain unprepared, waiting like sheep for the wolves?

‘Are we also to believe that, against all history and reason, Horus woke up mad one morning and decided to defy the Emperor? Or should we surmise that he perhaps saw a deeper truth and acted in the only way he could, in the only manner a warlord-bred demigod can act? I do not pretend to know the answers. Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge. I share your confusion, for these are terrible times that reason has forgotten. But I must ask you to consider one more thing.’

Luther laid his hand on the arm of Griffayn. The Grand Master seemed to tower over the seated Space Marine, passing on his approval with the touch.

‘Where, now, is the Lion when star systems burn and armies die? Does he come to his home, to fair Caliban, to make sure it is safe?’

There was a pregnant pause as everyone waited for the voted lieutenant to answer. Had Lord Cypher done enough to win Griffayn to the cause?

‘No,’ replied Griffayn, frowning. ‘The Lion went to Macragge.’

‘Macragge?’ Luther’s feigned surprise was almost believable even to Zahariel, who had been present when the Grand Master had first learned this. ‘What would take the Lion to Macragge when it seems rational to think that the Warmaster’s intentions have always been upon the Throneworld?’

‘Guilliman builds a second empire, abandoning his oaths to Terra,’ Griffayn confided.

Zahariel needed no psychic power to sense the shock of this revelation emanating from the audience. They had known of their lord’s departure, but

perhaps had not questioned the reasons for his absence.

‘The primarch abandons our world to cruel fate, not for the protection of Terra, but to raise up a rival to the Throne of the Emperor. Not he, nor the Emperor, nor Horus can be trusted with our best interest. That power must be held by Calibanites alone.’

The moment was nearly at hand. Even Belath was subdued, perhaps not convinced but no longer voicing opposition. From what little Zahariel had gleaned from his psychic assault on the Chapter Master, he believed that Belath would ultimately be swayed by the majority. He had always cleaved close to those that held the reins of power – the Lion and then Corswain. It would not take much for his loyalty to switch to Luther.

The Grand Master was so close to gaining the support of every Space Marine in the hall. Belath and Griffayn would be the foundation of a new ruling council headed by Luther and advised by Lord Cypher. Astelan would certainly become surplus to requirements.

The Master of the Mystai contemplated this likely future. The Order would be stronger, unified at the highest level of command. Luther’s vision of a liberated Caliban would become reality.

Peace in our times.

But Caliban did not desire peace. Peace was the soft prison. Peace was the deathly silence of the tomb.

Caliban needed strife. It needed conflict. The very things that Luther decried of the Lion would become his legacy – dissent quashed, opposition negated. A single voice. The voice of Luther, not Caliban.

Zahariel let the power of the Ouroboros burst out, tearing it from the minds of the assembled Space Marines to forge a single pulse of power. A bolt of green lightning sprang from his fingertips as he thrust his hand towards the head table, the air crackling and fizzing with energy.

The bolt struck Belath in the chest, cracking open his war-plate with a jade detonation. The blast hurled the Chapter Master through the air, sending his lifeless body skidding across the flags a dozen metres beyond.

‘A vision!’ shouted Zahariel. ‘He was going to attack you, Grand Master!’

Clamour filled the hall as the Dark Angels reacted. Armour whined and toppled benches crashed to the ground. The clatter of bolters being readied was a staccato overture of impending violence.

Lord Cypher drew his blade as Griffayn pulled a bolt pistol. Asmodeus rose up, a glimmering aura of power emanating from the wires of the psychic hood that encompassed his head.

On the mezzanines, bolters levelled at the crowd below, but in the eruption goblets both gold and silver had been thrown together, the Space Marines as

mixed as their loyalties. It had been meant as a last resort, a clean execution by Luther's command. Now the warriors of the Order looked to their Grand Master for command, uncertain of their purpose.

In the midst of this, Luther looked aghast at Belath's smoking corpse. He tore his gaze away, and in his eyes Zahariel saw a momentary hope, the notion that honour could yet be salvaged from the ruins of his plan.

'Slay the assassins!' roared Zahariel, pistol in hand.

The hall resounded to the deafening roar of bolters, lit by the flare of psychic bolts.

Luther addresses the assembled Dark Angels

TWENTY-EIGHT

Justice

Macragge

The Lion acted, throwing himself to the left. He felt rather than heard the hiss of claws cutting the air where he had been an instant before.

Silent. Deadly. An attack worthy of the self-proclaimed Night Haunter.

He rolled, swinging his sword across to block the next blow, the blade ringing against Curze's swipe. The Lion twisted, using it as a sword-breaker to trap a crackling fist. The move exposed the Lion's left side. Curze saw the opening and struck as quick as a viper, driving the dagger-claws of his right hand into the gap between the Lion's left pauldron and the gorget protecting his neck.

The pain flared up through his shoulder but the Lion had been expecting it and was moving even as the signals were buzzing along his nerves. He grabbed Curze's wrist in his fist, the two of them locked together.

Curze's nightmarish face was just a metre away. Gaunt. More than that, almost skeletal now, his flesh wasted to white skin and muscle, not an ounce of fat between surface and bone. His eyes were black, glinting in the golden light of irradiated snow. Thin lips were drawn back in a mad grin, exposing dirty pointed teeth and withered gums. A tongue like a lizard's flickered over the yellowing fangs.

'You have lost the only weapon that would have killed me,' the Lion growled.

'And which one is that?' Curze replied. His voice was as tainted by madness as his expression. Quick as lightning, the Night Haunter seemed to buckle, legs collapsing unnaturally as he fell away from the Lion's grasp and twisted. He flourished his freed right claw. 'This one?'

The claw speared towards the Lion's face, two fingers forming points aimed for the eyes, intended to blind, not kill. The Dark Angels primarch swayed out of the attack, his open hand whipping his bolter from his belt as he did so, like a pistol in his grip.

'Surprise,' the Lion spat.

He fired point-blank. The stream of bolts exploded across the Night Haunter's chest and face. Black flecks of paint and ragged skin tatters flew away from the detonations. With a screech Curze threw himself backwards, back arching and

twisting as he wheeled away from the next salvo of bolts, his claws striking out as he cut the projectiles from the air.

And then he was gone, swallowed by the darkness.

‘In midnight clad,’ the Lion said, reloading his bolter. He turned slowly, ears seeking the slightest sound, eyes and other senses seeking to penetrate the swirling storm and shadowed stone trees. ‘Predictable. So predictable. You have become a caricature, Curze. Once you were the terrible hand of justice, the dark avenger, the Night Haunter. Now you are just a clown, seeking justification for your pointless existence.’

A chuckle emanated from the darkness, followed by a whisper.

‘*We were born with the darkness in us. We cannot help the fact that we are murderers, no more than the poet can help the inspiration to sing. We were born with dark gods standing as our sponsors beside the beds where we were ushered into the world, and they have been with us since.’*

‘I have heard such claims before. I heard the promises and threats from the lips of the nephilla. My dreams were of storms and darkness too. I renounce your weakness. I have killed, but I am no murderer.’

‘*Really?*’

The Lion took a few paces towards the voice, stepping slowly with pistol held at the ready, blade to one side to parry. His eyes were in constant motion, piercing the darkness, watching for the faintest disturbance in the flurries of snow, seeking any imprint on the ash-covered ground. Curze’s next words sounded more distant, from the left.

‘I just like to kill. I want to kill.’

An exhalation. The faintest murmur.

The Lion turned, finger already squeezing the trigger as he brought up his sword point. Curze seemed to coalesce out of the drifting fragments of vaporised matter and ice. One moment empty space, the next gleaming claws speared towards the Lion’s chest, their pale witchglow lighting Curze’s snarling face from below.

The explosion of bolts seemed bright and colourful in the monochromatic whirl. Each became a blossom of red and orange surrounded by an aura of ceramite splinters. Blue lightning buzzed as one set of Curze’s claws raked along the Lion Sword and the other flickered past the Dark Angel’s face.

Curze was gone again, a wraith in the fog.

The Lion felt blood trickle down his right cheek. He started to turn once more, blade held horizontal. Curze’s next taunt came from behind.

‘*We’ve all got the power in our hands to kill, but most people are afraid to use it. The ones who aren’t afraid, they control life itself.’*

The Lion resisted the urge to spin towards the voice. It was a feint and he swung his sword to the right out of instinct, the same instinct that had saved him so many times in the forests of Caliban.

Curze let out a wail of pain, his claws lashing past the Lion's head, lanced onto the point of the Lion's blade. The Dark Angel thrust hard, pushing the sword another half-metre into Curze's gut.

'Clever Lion,' Curze sneered, wrenching himself away from the blade, leaving a slick of dark blood dribbling along the fuller. '*Total paranoia is just total awareness.*'

The Lion wasted no breath with more talk and opened fire with his last few bolts. Curze was gone again and they flared harmlessly into the petrified trees. He hung the empty weapon on his belt and drew a second, shorter sword in its place.

He started to step backwards, careful never to stop for a moment, turning, adjusting his weight, ready to shift and counter-attack in a heartbeat. With a backhanded slash, the Lion sheared through a petrified tree. It fell to the ground with barely a noise, muted by the ashen snow.

The primarch cut another and another, creating an open space about twenty metres across, expanding it with each felled tree.

'You can't cut down a whole forest to catch me,' Curze said.

The Lion said nothing and chopped through another stone trunk with a single blow. He took three more paces to the next tree and drew back his sword arm.

Curze launched at the Lion with claws outstretched, their tips cutting through falling snowflakes and motes of ash. The Dark Angel had been expecting the attack, had offered himself up to draw it out. His short sword was already rising to meet Curze's downward stroke.

The edge of the blade crashed against the underside of Curze's right hand, deflecting the blow above his shoulder. The Lion smashed his right hand into the Night Haunter's chin, pale skin scraping off across the knuckles as the blow sent his foe reeling.

This time there was no hesitation, no circumspect moment worrying about a counter-attack. The Lion threw himself after Curze before he could vanish, slashing and stabbing at his foe as he turned to retreat. He caught a glancing blow across Curze's calf, the tip of the Lion Sword shearing through the midnight-blue armour.

Almost tripping, Curze rolled to the left but the Lion was already upon him, switching his grip on the short sword to drive it down into the Night Haunter's left side. Curze hissed and lashed his claws blindly backwards, raking furrows across the Lion's outstretched arm.

Curze was on his feet in the moment it took the Lion to recover, and three strides later had managed to lose himself in the storm once more. This time he

could not disappear completely. The Lion smelled blood on the air, tasted the rad-wash from the armour of his prey. His skin prickled with the warp-taint of Curze.

He followed at a run, knowing exactly what the Night Haunter was planning to do.

The Lion burst out of the petrified trees just in time to see a darker shadow flit between the grey granite columns of the pagan Illyrian temple. He followed quickly, boots on stone like the sudden crash of thunder. Dodging between the pillars, the Lion made his way to the centre, where broad steps descended into the catacombs beneath the gate. Above, the roof did not form a complete dome, but was fashioned to leave a vaulted space above the centre. Thick beams formed two squares, one diagonally inside the other.

The Dreadwing had mapped it well, cataloguing every hall and antechamber, passageway and arch, stairway and cupboard. The Lion had memorised the layout from their reports. He had to expect that Curze had scouted every possible attack site and knew the locale in the same detail.

The subterranean reaches of the temple were spread over three levels, but the Lion made his way to the deepest, judging that Curze's sense of theatrics would lead him to the mausoleum where ancient priests had been interred in stone coffins.

A duel among dead heathens.

The tomb chamber was an octagonal shape thirty metres across and five high, big enough for the two primarchs to move without difficulty. The centre of the chamber was a disc of black stone, etched with a silver star. A faint light emanated from this slab, enough to show up the marble sarcophagi at each point of the star. Each was topped with a gisant representing the interred priests, clasping to their chests various sceptres, swords and orbs of their office. The Lion saw patrician faces, noble and strong-browed, faces set in peaceful death.

The sides of the tombs were carved with intertwining nightmarish figures – skeletal Deaths, fanged monstrosities, bat-winged devils. Outside the central eight were eight more, and in the circle about that, three of the tombs had gisants upon them, the other five empty.

The Lion stopped at the threshold, beneath a pointed arch at the bottom of the stairs that led into the catacomb. Curze crouched atop one of the vacant sarcophagi opposite. Blue sparks flew and the air split with a piercing screech as he drew a clawed finger along the rough stone.

'Can you hear their confessions, brother?' the Night Haunter said quietly. He scratched the tomb again, lips pursed with pleasure. 'They lived for the darker powers, long before our righteous brother ever set foot in Macragge Civitas. Think, Lion of Caliban, what might have been had Roboute woken from his

slumber in the highlands of Illyrium rather than the forests around Hera's Fall. It might have been his hand and not an assassin's that cut down noble Konor.'

'You know a lot about Macragge's history.'

'The Illyrians told me much.' Curze's lips twisted upwards in a disgusting, leering parody of a smile. 'They were so happy to have a demigod delivered to them, setting right the balance weighed against them so many decades ago.'

'Most of them are dead now,' said the Lion. He took a step. The glow of the Lion Sword and the powerfield of his second blade better illuminated a semicircle of the chamber. He saw that every brick in the ceiling, walls and floor was inscribed with the same angular device. Curze noticed his gaze.

'It's an old Illyrian word, *anorth*.' Curze shifted, slithering down to the floor, still hunched.

'What does it mean?' The Lion did not care, but the question occupied Curze as the Dark Angel took another step forward.

'Many things. The end. The beginning. The heights and depths. The warp.' Curze shrugged. 'Disorder. Anarchy. The unmaking of things and return to the womb. A complex concept for a nation of clueless barbarians, would you not agree?'

'And because you used them as a shield, they are all dead. I have erased what was left of their culture. You tainted it.'

'How does that make you feel?' Curze ran a narrow tongue over his fangs, head cocking to one side. 'Mothers and fathers dead. Orphans made and offspring slain. All for me.'

'What do you care?' The Lion advanced another pace. He was level with the outer ring of tombs, twenty metres from Curze. He knew there was no other way out of the chamber.

'I like children. They are tasty.'

'You are broken.' The Lion felt deep disgust, sickened by what had become of his brother. 'You were vile and twisted in Thramas, and perverse on Tsagualsa, but now you have sunk even lower.'

'Even psychopaths have *emotions*,' Curze said, affecting a sad face, brow furrowed, lips downturned. 'Then again, maybe not.'

He sprang onto a sarcophagus and used it to propel himself towards the ceiling. Incredibly he skittered over the stones like a spider, finding purchase for a few metres until he twisted and dropped towards the Lion.

The Dark Angel crashed backwards into a sarcophagus trying to avoid the attack. Claws left lacerations across his chest and right arm, the gouged ceramite splintering like bone.

Curze's foot smashed into the Lion's face as he bounded away, turning in mid-air to land cat-like at the bottom of the steps. The Night Haunter looked over his

shoulder with a vicious grin and raised his left hand. Between his fingers was something odd. It was a red gauntlet, two spurs of broken bone jutting from the severed wrist.

The Lion guessed what it was immediately. ‘Azkaellon’s hand?’

‘A little tinkering with his terminus device…’

The Night Haunter waved the hand with a smile and started up the stair. Three steps later he stopped and looked back, brow furrowing with confusion. He waved the hand again, even more dramatically.

‘I told you that you were becoming predictable,’ said the Dark Angel, advancing with the Lion Sword held in front of him. ‘An enclosed space laced with explosives? You did that in the Chapel of Memorial, trying to bury me and Guilliman. And then how clever you must have felt, turning Azkaellon’s failsafe device against him, destroying the entrance to the lord emperor’s hall and trapping the Sanguinary Guard outside. I can imagine you chuckled long and hard. It was curious that Azkaellon’s arm was never found. Melta-bombs went missing from one of my armoury supply transports yesterday. Did you really think you could trick me again?’

‘What?’

‘Should I speak more slowly? While you followed me to the peak, dogging my steps like an impotent shadow, my men disarmed the melta-bombs you stole and planted here.’

The Lion broke into a run. With an irritated hiss, Curze hurled the Blood Angel’s hand at the primarch and sprinted up the stairwell. The Lion followed a few metres behind, too close to allow his foe the chance to spin and attack.

Curze turned left and right, navigating the corridors with ease, slipping around the corners and junctions like a wisp of smoke. They raced through rows of wooden chambers lined with cabinets and shelves, where centuries-old ink stains and flecks of paint still blotted lecterns and desks. The Lion was more ponderous in his pursuit, crashing into the walls as he turned at speed, rebounding from ancient bricks with growls and snarls.

They reached the steps leading up to the surface. The Lion stopped, his boots sliding for a moment across the wet ash that had been blown down from above. Curze did not pause and was halfway up the steps.

A faint hiss sounded from the opening at the top of the stairs. Curze stumbled to a halt a moment before the hunter-killer missile smashed into the steps above him. Stone shards and shrapnel engulfed the Night Haunter as the blast-wave tossed him against the wall.

The stairwell rang in the aftermath, but not loud enough to mask the approaching roar of plasma jets. The Lion also heard the thud of boots on the

stones above. He caught a glimpse of the three Fire Raptors hovering over the open domework on the surface.

‘I brought some friends.’ The Lion raised his blades, blocking the bottom of the stairs. ‘I never cared much for the necessities of drama.’

Curze’s look of betrayal was almost comic. His shock quickly turned to anger. The Lion had never seen the like, his brother’s face becoming a mask of pure rage.

‘You maggots make me sick. I will be avenged! Darkness dwells within us all.’

Curze became a grim missile tipped with glinting claws, spearing down the stairwell. The Lion swung his blade, feeling it bite armour and flesh, but the Night Haunter’s impetus barrelled them both down to the stones with a crash of armour.

They rolled, parted and came to their feet facing each other, stooped below the ceiling of the passageway.

This time there was no taunting, no cat-and-mouse. Curze’s claws whirled and slashed with insane fury and it took all of the Lion’s focus to defend himself against the assault. He was forced to give ground, a storm crackling between him and the Night Haunter as field-sheathed swords and lightning claws clashed and shrieked.

‘You can’t kill me!’ roared Curze, lancing a claw towards the Lion’s throat, the blow deflected by a last-minute swing of his short sword. ‘You don’t kill me!’

The words seem to settle Curze, though the ferocity of his attack did not relent. A dozen new rents opened up across the Lion’s armour amidst the flood of blows. He felt the burn of a near-miss sear across his forehead, momentarily blinding him in his right eye.

‘You have to accept it,’ Curze spat. ‘You don’t kill me. I am redeemed, my life taken by one of the Emperor’s assassins.’

‘I accept nothing,’ the Lion replied, expression grim. He parried another swiping claw and stopped giving ground. The Lion Sword leapt up as though fuelled by its own lifeforce, tip plunging through Curze’s right forearm, pinning him to the wall of the corridor.

With a sickening rip of flesh and cracking armour, the Night Haunter tore his arm free, leaving near-desiccated skin and oily blood stuck to the bricks. The tips of the claws cut the Lion’s throat, just a scratch really, but enough to send him reeling back a few more steps.

Curze launched a fresh offensive, gloating, eyes wide and lips curled with glee. In the close confines of the corridor the clash of weapons was deafening, the nearness of Curze overwhelming, an assault on all of the primarch’s senses as much as the one against his body. The Night Haunter’s attacks pushed the Lion back to the top of another stairwell, two dozen steps that led down to the second

sublevel. The floor below was a maze of wooden compartments, an old scriptorium for texts long forbidden in the rest of Macragge, surrounded by a few closed cells and small dormers, likely storerooms and personal chambers where the priests would prepare for the ceremonies that took place on the surface.

The heel of the primarch skidded over the edge of the first step and he wavered for a half-second before righting himself. He dared not look back, but risked all with a strike towards Curze's head, the short sword in his left hand glanced aside by a claw, millimetres from its target.

It was enough of a distraction to restore the balance of the fight. The Lion took a long stride, flinging himself into Curze, arms wrapping around the Night Haunter. Chest to chest he heaved, twisting as he lifted, legs straightening to throw the two of them towards the steps.

He landed on top of Curze. The exhalation from the other primarch stank like the grave-air in the coffins below. The ferrocrete of the step crumbled and they fell again, this time the Lion taking the brunt of the fall. Another rolling bounce, Curze snarling centimetres from the Lion's face, trying to bite him with piranha-like fangs.

They hit the floor sideways, jarring the short sword from the Lion's grip. He made no effort to retrieve it, but arrowed his empty fingers into Curze's throat. The blow would have decapitated any normal warrior, but Curze simply let out a coughing laugh.

Straddling his foe, the Lion's fist connected with Curze's forehead, driving the Night Haunter's skull into his backpack with a loud crack. Curze flailed a hand towards the Lion, a wild blow that was easily turned aside.

Curze continued to laugh, blood flecking white skin and brown teeth.

There was something the Lion had to know, taunted by old dreams and Curze's words.

'Why did you turn? Why did you betray our father?'

Curze was not listening. His gaze moved past the Lion's shoulder, not to the ceiling but to something that only he could see. 'You feel the last bit of breath leaving their body. You're looking into their eyes. A person in that situation is a god!'

The Lion felt his prey go limp and found Curze staring at him. He was not sure how to read the other primarch's expression. Happiness, of a kind. Adulation. Relief?

'Why not?' crowed Curze. 'Why not betray him? When these thoughts entered my brain, I will never know, but they are here to stay. How does one cure oneself? I can't stop it, the monster in my head goes on, and hurts me as well as our father. Maybe you can stop it. I can't.'

The Lion lay the edge of his sword against Curze's throat, on the exact line of a scar he had left not so long ago, though now it seemed like a lifetime.

'I am ready to be released.' Curze closed his eyes, his face going slack, the torment and madness seeping away to leave an emaciated but human face. 'Release me.'

The Lion remembered.

'Fall,' the Knight-Lord said to his brother. His voice was broken, ragged, breathless. 'Fall.'

The other warrior's black eyes were wide, trembling as his life flooded through his hands. He spoke without sound, lips working worthlessly, and finally fell to one knee. The wounds in his stomach and chest bled as fiercely as the cut throat. His body, systematically shredded and torn by the kingly blade, seemed to be held together by desperate hate alone.

The Knight-Lord wasn't a soul given to smiling, nor was he petty enough to mock a fallen foe. He lifted his blade in salute, crosspiece resting against his crowned forehead, honouring a slain enemy.

'I told you,' the Lion said to his dying brother, 'I would be the end of you, Curze.'

He stood up and sheathed the Lion Sword.

'You were right, I am not going to kill you. I never intended to kill you. That is why I won.'

Curze's eyes snapped open, filled with hatred again. The Lion seized him in both hands, dragged him up and then drove him down, smashing the Night Haunter into the hard floor. Again, and twice more the Lion beat Curze against the unyielding stone.

Curze twisted like a hooked fish, one moment in the Lion's grip, the next arching away, turning in mid-air. The Lion lunged after him, snaring an ankle. He turned on his heel, swinging Curze by the leg, crashing him against a wall. The Lion spun back and released his hold, hurling the Night Haunter through half a dozen scriptors' stalls, ancient wood turned to a cloud of dust and splinters.

Curze got to all fours, but not quick enough to avoid the Lion's wrath. An armoured boot hit the Night Haunter in the midriff and lifted him in the air. A second kick connected with his jaw, sending the Night Lord onto his back. The Lord of Caliban reached down and dragged Curze like a rag doll, threw him again, turning another ten stalls to kindling.

Looming out of the splinter-fog the Lion smashed a knee into Curze's face as he tried to rise. The Night Haunter's left arm hung limply as the Dark Angel picked him up again. With a grunt, he tore the powerplant from Curze's armour, tossing the backpack aside with a hiss of broken coolant links and a shower of sparks.

Throat in one hand, a leg in the other, the Lion hoisted Curze above his head. The knight of Caliban dropped to one knee, bringing his foe down across his shoulders. Armour split like bamboo and bones cracked, eliciting a shriek from the Night Haunter.

With a contemptuous glare, the Lion tossed Curze to the ground. He flopped to his broken back.

‘Why?’ groaned Curze.

‘I am no murderer,’ the Lion replied. ‘You will be executed, but not for my vengeance. For justice. I will not make you a martyr, nor vindicate your twisted ideals.’

Curze’s clawed fingers scrabbled at the stone for a few seconds, but there was no movement below his waist. The Lion stamped on a hand, buckling the gauntlet, shattering the blades. He did the same to the other, leaving the Night Haunter a paralysed, clawless heap.

Curze started to laugh, a rasping chuckle that shook his chest. He looked straight at the Lion, into his eyes, into his soul, and the laugh grew louder.

‘Before all is done, it is not only my back that will be broken.’ The black eyes were like pits, swallowing the Lion, tiny reflections of his wild appearance reflected in each. ‘I will not beg for my life – but *you* will. Of all your brothers, for me you will sacrifice your honour.’

The Lion dragged his gaze away and noticed something at Curze’s waist. It was a sword hanging with blade naked, the design obviously of Calibanite origin. He leaned down and tore the weapon from the belt.

‘What is this?’ he demanded, holding the weapon in front of Curze’s battered face. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘One of your warriors was very careless, brother.’ Curze let his head droop, lank hair spilling across the dark stone. ‘He left it in my back.’

The sound of armoured footfalls echoed from the corridor above. The Lion straightened and turned to see Redloss and his companions arrive at the top of the stair.

‘Hold!’ snapped the primarch. ‘His body is broken but his spite remains keen. Bring chains. Heavy chains.’

HEX’D

TWENTY-NINE

The Lord Cypher

Caliban

Though the Hall of Decemial was large, it was still close confines for a firefight and the erupting battle soon fell to hand-to-hand combat between those loyal to Luther and those who had been of mind with slain Belath. Chainsword teeth screeched across ceramite armour and sharp combat knives glittered in the lamplight of the hall. Armoured gauntlets crashed against war-plate and flesh. The shouts of both sides were deafening.

For those on the balconies it was impossible to tell friend from foe and the brief fusillade from above ceased. Luther looked on in horror from the head table, Lord Cypher beside him with plasma pistol and power sword at the ready.

Asmodeus crossed blades with Griffayn, the famed Spear-Cast slashing his sword repeatedly at the Librarian, each blow deflected by a shimmering wall of psychic energy. The psyker offered little attack in return, all his might concentrated on protecting himself against the blistering assault.

Zahariel entered the fray with pistol in one hand and his force sword in the other, psychic power pulsing along the length. He noticed absent-mindedly that his blade had a jade glow, where once it had shimmered with azure force. His Mystai followed in his wake, Tanderion and Vassago armed with sceptre-like maces that burned with psychic energy, Cartheus with a gold-shimmering morning star and Asradael bearing a long bastard sword.

The power of Caliban swirled around Zahariel, drawn to those whose thoughts were disloyal to the world of their birth. To the Master of the Mystai the signal was as clear as if they had painted their armour bright orange, the defiant Dark Angels gleaming in his second sight.

He drove the point of his blade into the side of the closest dissident, a flare of psychic power parting the ceramite plate protecting fused ribs within. Bone shattered as though hit by an explosive bolt, allowing the warp-infused tip to slid effortlessly into lung and secondary heart. Gasping, the Space Marine tried to turn, but was clubbed down by the bolter of a former brother, the back of his head broken to a bloody mush by repeated blows.

Coming face to face with the other Space Marine, Zahariel exchanged a look of solidarity in the moment before they turned away.

+*Master!*+ Tanderion's psychic warning came at the same moment as Zahariel shared his companion's premonition.

At the head table Luther was being ushered away from the fight by one of the rebel officers. Lord Cypher raised his plasma pistol. To any other, he was firing at those allied with Belath. In the next moment of the vision, the ball of plasma smashed into Zahariel's exposed back.

Before the Master of the Mystai could respond, Tanderion threw himself towards Lord Cypher, one hand raised as though to ward off the shot. His psychic shield had only started to materialise when the plasma bolt slashed into his face, erupting across his helm with white-hot fury.

The Mystai's headless corpse fell to one knee and then pitched sideways, the cauterised remains of his neck smoking like the roasts that had been brought earlier to the feasting warriors.

Though he had been expecting it, literally foreseen it, Zahariel was momentarily stunned by Lord Cypher's attack. Leaving him to die in Northwilds had been passive, an act of opportunism. Now the Guardian of the Order had revealed his full intent.

Zahariel knew that the confrontation could no longer be avoided. The mayhem of the fighting gave him the chance to strike down his former ally, now most certainly revealed as a deadly rival.

Realising that his opportunity to slay the Master of the Mystai had passed, Lord Cypher retreated, running towards one of the serfs' entrances. That was even better, Zahariel decided. Provided he could get to Lord Cypher before he reached sanctuary with Luther.

The fighting had spilled across the hall and was moving beyond as singly and in pairs, those that were opposed to Luther's statement of independence tried to escape into the rest of the Angelicasta, perhaps hoping to find fresh allies.

+With me, Mystai,+ Zahariel commanded, cutting the leg from beneath another Space Marine to break free of the melee. He raced after Lord Cypher, robes flapping against his armour.

Beyond the hall was a short corridor that sloped downwards, ending in a steep stair. Zahariel almost toppled head-first down the steps. He snatched at the metal rail bolted to the wall, his armoured weight ripping it free from its mounting, but the steel strong enough to hold him for a second.

The clatter of boots on stone echoed from below. Zahariel heard shouts of surprise and muted barks of command. As swift as he was able he descended, the crunching footfalls of the others just behind.

Three turns down they reached a vault beneath the Hall of Decemial, thick pillars of brick supporting the weight of the vast chamber above. Several attendants fled towards them, concern on their faces.

‘Go!’ Zahariel ordered them, thrusting his sword towards the steps.

They needed no further encouragement and a few seconds later their footsteps dwindled from hearing.

‘I can sense you are still here,’ Zahariel called out, the shimmer of Lord Cypher’s mind a few metres off to the right. His Mystai fanned out in that direction, the flickering light from their psychic weapons throwing dancing shadows across the terracotta floor. ‘You sought this confrontation. Why postpone it any longer?’

A dark shape flew out of the shadows ahead, some distance from the soul-signature Zahariel had sensed. A purplish flame licked along Lord Cypher’s sword as he swept it down into the side of Cartheus, cutting through bone and organs to the spine. The Mystai roared in pain as he collapsed, his morning star mace falling from his grasp.

Lord Cypher continued his charge, smashing his shoulder into Asradael, the two of them crashing into a pillar. The Guardian of the Order spun away and was swallowed by the shadows.

Zahariel threw out his thoughts, trying to find the psychic trail left by Lord Cypher, but found only darkness.

‘Show yourselves!’ he snarled, flooding the vault with power from Caliban.

The psychic twilight revealed several dozen short, hooded figures, their eyes pinpricks of scarlet power. They stood at the periphery, their attention fixed on the Mystai.

‘We are on the same side,’ Zahariel said, starting to walk towards the closest Watcher in the Dark, sword held out to one side but ready to parry. ‘We both serve Caliban.’

‘You do not.’ The voice was Lord Cypher’s but he spoke as if the head of a chorus, a whisper of others behind it that did not echo in the vault. ‘You serve Caliban’s prisoner.’

‘No, the soul of Caliban is chained, it must be set free.’ Zahariel hurled a sheet of flame in the direction of the voice but the inferno guttered and died within a few metres.

‘The Ouroboros is not Caliban’s soul. It is an invader.’

The world felt disjointed around Zahariel. He stumbled although the floor was level, disorientated. The pillars seemed to soar up higher than the roof of the Angelicasta, the vault spread further than the horizon. Everything was slow, the motes of dust and ash falling from the bricks hung in suspension, but on the boundary of his senses the world spun faster, days and nights rising and falling, each no more than a heartbeat long.

He wanted to throw up.

The energy of Caliban snatched at his arm, moving it without his volition. The ring of metal against crystal-studded metal was stark and sharp as his blade met the downswing of Lord Cypher's attack. Zahariel had been unaware of his approach, and now that he saw his foe, his mind reeled. *Where there had been an armour-clad warrior there stood a man garbed in a robe of bark and leaves, a tree given human form. More than a tree, a whole forest, his hair its spilling canopy, his muscles powered by the strength of millions of deep roots…*

'Back!' The Master of the Mystai unleashed his anger in an unfocused burst, a wave of pure energy exploding out from him.

The green man stood unbowed, flexing branch-like fingers.

'It is not too late,' Lord Cypher told him. *The bearded man's lips moved with the words, but they came at Zahariel from a great distance.* 'Renounce this false master and pledge yourself to the Order.'

'It was not the cave that brought the first knight here, was it?' Zahariel laughed, pulsing with energy from the world's heart. 'It was the Watchers. They needed a warden for their prison. The Order does not fight for Caliban, it fights for them.'

'The Order is Caliban.'

'We are not their slaves! Caliban, the Ouroboros, will free us. Free us from the Imperium, from fear of Horus. Free us from these offworld creatures that use us for their own means. It is you that serves the false masters. I have been shown the truth. Your words have no power here. *They* have no power but that which we grant them.'

Zahariel rose to his feet, banishing the vision of the green man, rendering Lord Cypher back to his mortal form. The Guardian of the Order hacked at the cocoon of energy that protected Zahariel, his swings growing weaker, more desperate.

'You cannot attack me directly.' Zahariel ignored Lord Cypher and directed his words at the Watchers in the Dark. 'You act through us, turning us into your shields and your swords. Not I.'

The Ouroboros thrashed against its bonds, beseeching Zahariel to set it free. The Angelicasta, all of Aldurukh shifted. A tremor only, nothing like the great quake that had sunk half of the Northwilds arcology.

'You brought it here?' Terror was etched into every word that came from his masked foe. The un-legionary fear that had gripped Lord Cypher in the Northwilds was a palpable aura now, rising from his body like a heat shimmer.

Zahariel felt Vassago joining his mind to his master's, fusing with the spirit of the Ouroboros, powering his thoughts with shared psychic potential.

'Leave,' he told the Watchers. 'Leave or I will unleash the Conqueror Worm and it will devour us all. You are not welcome in Aldurukh.'

A moment passed, eternal and instant, and the vault returned to normal, lit by a few crimson-glassed lamps, made of stone and mortar and nothing more.

Cypher stood before Zahariel. Vassago and Asradael arrived behind the Guardian of the Order.

‘My lord, your Watchers have abandoned you.’ Zahariel stepped forward, an arm’s length from his rival. The eyes behind the visor were filled with fear, not anger.

‘You have no sword.’ As Zahariel said the words, the energy of Caliban snaked along Lord Cypher’s blade, turning it to rust that fell to the floor. ‘Show me your face.’

Tendrils of green power ripped the mask from the warrior’s helm. Zahariel took a step back, surprised by his recognition of the face beneath it.

‘A secret well kept,’ he murmured. ‘One that you need not keep much longer. On your knees.’

Psychic power scythed through Lord Cypher’s legs, shattering bone within the flesh. With a pained cry he fell forward to all fours, head bowed before Zahariel.

‘You damn… yourself… and all… of Caliban,’ Lord Cypher whispered between pained grunts. ‘You know nothing… of the… price… of Chaos.’

‘Make sure the body is not found,’ Zahariel told his Mystai as he turned away. ‘Only the stones will remember him.’

THIRTY

A broken blade

Ultramar

The legata collegius had the appearance of a gladiatorial amphitheatre, circular with steep tiers of seats surrounding it. The floor was, by tradition, layered with fine white sand from the coasts at Adelphius. Once open to the air, it was now protected from the elements by a weathershield that projected constant summer skies, though outside the snows had started to fall in earnest. The colours of the ancient houses were hung from the upper limits of the grandstand – banners of red and gold, blue and silver, green and black, each large enough to blanket a super-heavy tank.

There was a legend across Macragge that it had once hosted bloodsports for the old Macraggian Battle Kings, but Guilliman's researches had revealed nothing more than contests being resolved with hyperbole and rhetoric.

He wondered if today would see those gory myths come to life.

The accoutrements and furniture of the court were built from dark mountain trees, almost as black as coal. A few changes had been made to accommodate the ascension of the Imperial Triumvirate. The long table where once five *judicia major* had sat had been removed, replaced with chairs and desks suited to the physique of the primarchs.

Like a vanguard in front of these ultimate arbiters were arranged a dozen smaller chairs and tables, from which it was customary for the tetrarchs and their *praetor civilis* to listen to appeals put before them, against cases already passed by the *magistars* of the outer court.

Plaintiff and defendant, during the course of normal dispute, would thus proceed from the gates at the southern end of the legata collegius, putting the case before an available magistar. Upon receiving judgement – one day only was allowed for the presentation of evidence – the parties would either agree to the summary judgement or bring their case before the praetor civilis. Advocates' fees being arranged such that progressively higher circles of the court risked financial ruin on many, only those that truly believed they had been judged wrongly took their cases all the way to the judicia major.

Sanguinius had not yet entered and Guilliman sat alone. The stands were packed, many of the terraces filled with Space Marines from the Legions present

on Macragge – the black of the Lion's warriors, the pale-armoured White Scars, a red splash of Blood Angels, ebon-and-silver of the Iron Hands and the blue-grey of the Wolves from Fenris. Had it not been such a terrible occurrence for their gathering, Guilliman might have been pleased at the proof of his theory that Macragge could be the rallying point of the Imperium's defenders. The cobalt-blue of Guilliman's XIII was everywhere, not with the other Space Marines but amongst the dresses, coats and robes of the civilian attendees.

With their own people.

Often there was a carnival atmosphere in the legata collegius as students of law and idlers watched and listened to the proceedings like the entertainment shows on the civil broadcasts. Today the audience waited with hushed expectation. Five companies of the Praecental Guard had been drafted in to assist the college *vigiles* that were tasked with the expulsion of troublemakers and drunkards. Tickets had been issued by lottery, such was the demand to witness history taking place.

There had been demand for visual-feed teams to be stationed around the arena but Guilliman had thought this a step too far. The matter at hand was not to be treated as an amusing diversion.

In normal circumstance, the legata collegius was for civil matters, but the Lion's declaration of Legatus Militant had turned it into a military tribunal. Even that was inadequate for the case about to be held.

Such was the nature of Macragge law – the twelve Acts of the Legatus Tabulae that were so sacrosanct that Guilliman had not dared change them even during his most sweeping reforms – the primarchs could not bring the case against Konrad Curze as well as sit as his judges. In a purpose-built box to the right of the thrones, the senior officers of three Legions had been assembled. They were both plaintiffs and witnesses, survivors of Curze's evil to speak on behalf of the dead.

The benches for the advocates were empty. Curze would speak for himself. Not even the famously contentious advocates of the legata collegius were willing to sully themselves defending the Night Haunter – not that he would suffer any other to speak his case for him.

The murmur of conversation died away as Sanguinius entered without fanfare. He walked across the arena, the tips of his wings carving trails in the white sand. His armour sparkled in the artificial light, the gilded ornamentation glowing as though lit from within. Straw-gold hair cascaded down his shoulders. He held his chin high, piercing eyes scanning the crowds as he sat down.

How like an emperor, Guilliman thought.

The general hubbub resumed and Sanguinius leaned towards Guilliman as he sat.

'Is it right that we do this so publicly, brother?' asked the regent emperor.

‘Justice unseen is no justice,’ Guilliman replied. ‘That is the basis of the twelve Acts, the reason for the legata collegius being open to all.’

‘I worry that we are airing in public matters that should not be given such freedom to spread on the wings of rumour.’

Guilliman looked up at his brother, surprised by his turn of phrase and the intent. ‘How so? Are we not in the right?’

Sanguinius shook his head. ‘It is not our argument that causes me concern. Our deranged brother has sought attention for his cause. He demands the right to vindicate himself. If he is such a destructive flame, why do we labour to give him the oxygen he requires?’

‘What whispers would be carried to the further corners in the absence of testimony? The people have seen fire and death brought to Illyrium, and now they must see the reason for it.’

‘This might be Curze’s plan. His cause found sympathy in Illyrium, his words will be conveyed to the Five Hundred Worlds next. He could not have created a greater platform for his hate to spread.’

‘We cannot stand above the law. Such thinking legitimises the social vandalism of creatures like Curze. He is entitled to the full protection of our legal process. He has the right to speak. If we deny it to him, he has every right to deny its validity. One must uphold *all* of the law, or none of it, brother.’

Sanguinius smiled, though the expression was tainted by a sorrowful look in his eyes.

‘You really believe that, don’t you, Roboute?’ The Blood Angel looked away, his stern demeanour returning. ‘What other news will spread do you think? What lies of Horus and Lorgar, what untruths we cannot gainsay will flow from his lips?’

‘It will be our part to counter them, to issue forth the truth. Let us have faith that right makes might. And in that faith let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.’

‘That is a lot to place on faith, brother.’

Guilliman considered the points made by the regent emperor. There was some truth to the assertion that they had curtailed the misinformation spread by Lorgar and his agents. The truth was on their side, but Curze had a manner about him that would stir up discontent. He knew how to find the cracks in a man’s resolve and weaken them further. The Night Haunter and his Legion had been characterised by others as using ‘terror’ tactics, but there was far more to Curze’s strategies than simple intimidation. He fostered division amongst his enemies, the way Sanguinius exuded unity with his allies.

‘I am not above error,’ the Lord Warden conceded. ‘You are the Imperator Regis, and I, and the law, are the implementation of your will.’

This confession did not please Sanguinius. He bowed his head, fingers to his brow for a moment.

‘Would you do this for me, brother? If you abandon your principles on my whim, what stops me becoming a tyrant?’

‘Your heart, my lord emperor.’ Guilliman had never said anything truer and he felt for his brother at that moment, knowing that his very reluctance to lead was the greatest reason for him to be the leader. ‘No ill can come of your true intent. We are a triumvirate, but you are the Emperor-to-be. The Lion and I agree upon this fact. Some single mind must be master, else there will be no agreement in anything.’

Sanguinius raised his head, and looked around the arena. For a few seconds, Guilliman thought the Imperator Regis might do as he said and declare Curze unfit for trial. Would he be able to follow still, his principles overturned? Was that the price he would have to pay for Imperium Secundus to succeed?

‘Bring in the prisoner,’ Sanguinius announced, his voice booming across the amphitheatre.

Carried by a vox-system to the temporary cage built beneath the legata collegius, Sanguinius’ announcement raised the heads of the Lion and Curze together. The Dark Angel had not left his captive’s side for a moment, but Curze seemed resigned to his trial and had remained silent since he had been taken from the Illyrian fane. He broke the silence with a mocking smile.

‘The circus begins. Again.’

The Lion grabbed the shackles that bound Curze’s hands to a chain belt around his waist. The prisoner was garbed in a kilt of black leather, his white hair tied back. His fingers were tipped with cracked nails, his bony feet the same. Without his armour he seemed a lot shorter, though he was still rangier than his captor. Curze’s skin was as pallid as a deep-sea fish, blue veins stark against the white. Scars marked much of his body, some so old they were nothing more than pink smudges, others much fresher, like the scabs where the Lion Sword had pierced him, and the cut across his throat.

Bare feet flapping on the stone, healing spine supported by the rings and callipers of a torsion brace, Curze did not resist as the Lion pushed him from the reinforced cage towards the steps that ascended to the open dome of the legata collegius. Alone, the primarch of the Dark Angels led the Night Haunter into the bright lights, the thousands-strong crowd silent as the object of so much horror and fear emerged from the darkened passageway.

Curze looked around, his face impassive, showing none of his antics. The slightest sneer twisted his lips as the Lion brought him across the white sands and set him before Guilliman and Sanguinius.

‘If you move from that spot, I will kill you,’ the Lion warned before moving to his chair.

‘Hello, brothers,’ said Curze, turning his gaze from the Lion to Guilliman before his stare rested on Sanguinius. ‘All still alive and well, I see.’

Sanguinius stood up.

‘Konrad Curze, you have been brought before the Triumvirate Imperialis to answer for crimes and atrocities committed against the Imperium and its servants. A full account of the accusations will be made in due course, but suffice for the moment to say that you have brought war and orchestrated a campaign of terror and murder. The law of Macragge presumes your innocence on this matter, but do you wish to make any opening statement of defence?’

Curze looked down at his manacles and rattled them gently, bottom lip pouting. He sighed and returned his gaze to Sanguinius, head slightly cocked.

‘Once again, I only did what I was born to do, brother. What we were all born to do.’

The Lion leaned forward, fixing his gaze on the twisted primarch.

‘You have been given time to review the evidence against you. Do you freely admit to the crimes presented to this court?’

‘The content of the events discussed are not in error. I contend only that what I have done are not crimes.’

An angry whispering broke out amongst the terraces and stands, much of it from the Space Marines present. The Lion glanced across at the legionaries ready to give testimony.

‘There are many that disagree.’

Curze followed his gaze, eyes narrowing. His expression brightened after a moment.

‘Commander Azkaellon! I must admit you are not as well armed as last time we met!’

‘Filth!’ roared the Blood Angel, rising to leave the box. His companions restrained him, Holguin and Gorod moving to calm the wounded Space Marine. Curze laughed. A few in the crowd shouted threats and accusations.

‘Do you refuse to accept the authority of this court?’ asked Guilliman. ‘Do you dispute our right to sit in judgement?’

‘Your right?’ Curze shook his head and licked his lips. He tried to gesture towards the Lion but the shackles restrained him. ‘Only the right of the one that brought me here.’

The Lion shook his head when Guilliman looked at him. He had expected Curze to resist at some point, now he was doing so in front of the largest audience.

‘Do you have a specific complaint?’ Guilliman continued. ‘This court is not a place for innuendo.’

‘I am afraid that I cannot quote text and line from the laws of Macragge, but I am sure that it is beyond the bounds of the law for a criminal to be tried by another.’

‘You accuse me of breaking the law?’ The Lion had vowed to himself not to rise to Curze’s barbed remarks. He kept his tone level, his demeanour calm, emulating the detached manner of Guilliman. ‘I operate with the full authority of the regent emperor and the Triumvirate Imperialis. My actions are founded upon the basis of Legatus Militant, affording me every extension of the law.’

‘Hypocrite!’ spat Curze. ‘You have killed far more citizens of the Five Hundred Worlds than I!’

‘Casualties of war, as covered by the rules of engagement,’ the Lion said patiently. ‘Regrettable, but not illegal.’

The Night Haunter turned his appeal to Guilliman.

‘Brother… I am surprised to find you support this murderer with your silence. You abrogated your power to a megalomaniac and wonder where it went wrong. Did you not think what would happen when you let the Lion out of his cage?’

‘I am not on trial here!’ bellowed the Lion, knowing that Curze was seeking to undermine the cohesion of the Triumvirate.

‘But he should be!’ Curze snarled in return, still looking at Guilliman.

The primarch of the Ultramarines frowned and glanced to Sanguinius for guidance. The emperor opened his palm towards Curze.

‘You have made no claim backed by law. I ask again, is there a clear accusation you want to make before we proceed?’

‘Ask our noble brother of Caliban what happened on Alma Mons. Ask him about the phosphex and promethium, the plasma and rad-bombs. Was that not excessive? Why did he not use lance strikes and torpedoes to break open the strongholds of the Gatepeak? He sought to inflict as much lasting pain and misery as possible.’

‘Not so,’ said Guilliman. The Lion realised with a twist in his gut what the Lord Warden was about to say and rose from his chair to stop him, but too late. ‘The Imperator Regis forbade the Lord Protector from utilising orbital bombardment.’

‘I must remind you, brothers, that this serpent will do all he can to turn us against each other.’ The Lion drew his sword and took a step towards Curze, who looked not so much like a cat that had the cream as had been given the whole dairy. ‘He stalls and obfuscates in an attempt to avoid the obvious nature of his guilt.’

‘Stay your blade!’ Sanguinius rose also. ‘There will be no summary execution here.’

‘No orbital attack?’ Curze chuckled, his sly stare fixing on the Lion. ‘My case is made for me. Were not the slopes of the Gatepeak torn asunder from the heavens? I saw with my own eyes the fury of the Lion unleashed from above.’

‘We monitored no such attack,’ said Guilliman, but he sounded uncertain.

‘A clever ruse.’ Curze was genuinely impressed, the Lion realised. ‘Drop pods as bombs. Gunships as missiles. Assault rams turned into torpedoes. All the joy of orbital attack, none of the mess of admitting you broke your oath!’

Guilliman looked as though he had been struck, the blood draining from his face. The Lion saw first confusion and then distress, which rapidly became anger. Guilliman surged to his feet, face flushing where it had been pale a moment before.

‘You lied to us!’ he roared. ‘You had no intent of keeping your oaths.’

‘Brother, still yourself,’ said the Lion. ‘Think of where we are.’

There were other damning shouts echoing around the arena. Guilliman advanced on him, jabbing an accusing finger.

‘You had no intention of honouring the command of our emperor!’

‘It is not so,’ said the Lion. ‘I withdrew my troops at your behest. Only then did you tie my hands with your vacillation.’

‘Yes, hands tied,’ cackled Curze, jangling his manacles. ‘Nobody can do any damage with their hands tied, can they?’

‘Shut up!’ The Lion raised his blade towards Curze. One stroke would end his lies and manipulations. The Dark Angel threw out his other hand in appeal to Sanguinius. ‘It was a decision of the moment, not a forethought. How many of our warriors would have died in pointless assault?’

‘Put down your sword, brother.’ Sanguinius did not raise his voice, but his words cut through the tumult that was growing in the arena. His wings spread out, his immense presence suddenly filling the arena, dominating it with sheer force of will. For a few seconds it seemed as though a golden light flowed from the Blood Angel.

The Lion hesitated, goaded by Curze’s knowing, mocking leer. One blow would be all it took. He looked back at Sanguinius, seeing both the majesty and the humanity in his brother.

His hand dropped to his side.

‘As my lord commands.’

‘You should have come to us, brother,’ Sanguinius said. ‘Trusted us, our judgement.’

‘There was no time,’ said the Lion, but he knew the words sounded weak. ‘The need of command can be urgent and uncompromising.’

‘There is no excuse.’ Guilliman now also directed his words to Sanguinius. ‘A direct edict was disobeyed. The Lord Protector enforces the will of the regent emperor – he does not define it.’

‘Would that task be left to the Lord Warden, perhaps?’ the Lion retorted. ‘Only room for the one hand on the tiller?’

‘Yes, Roboute, what about your ambitions?’ crowed Curze. ‘Afraid of the competition?’

‘Still your tongue!’ roared Guilliman. ‘Justice still awaits you.’

‘Justice has hunted me since the day I opened my eyes on night-shrouded Nostramo,’ Curze said with a sad sigh. ‘But none of you have the guts to level it. You force me to wait until that assassin’s blade strikes. You are all cowards, speaking of conviction but showing none. Not born yet is the wielder of the blade that will bring me peace.’

‘You will say no more,’ said Sanguinius, a warning finger directed at Curze. The Blood Angel regarded the Lion for a few seconds, seeming to sag inside his armour. His wings furled. ‘The sword cannot free itself from the hand that wields it. We cannot allow our blades to rule us, they are uncaring masters.’

Sanguinius turned away, laying a hand upon the arm of his throne as though weary, the movement a damning judgement without need for words.

‘Give me your blade, brother.’ Guilliman spoke quietly but his words seemed thunder-loud in the quiet of the amphitheatre. He approached the Lion with hand outstretched.

Another look to Sanguinius confirmed that the primarch of the Dark Angels was alone in this. Curze was still within reach. One strike would be all it took to sever his head properly. Perhaps sensing the Lion’s thoughts, Guilliman moved. His attention focused on the Night Haunter, the Lion did not react until the Lion Sword was already in the fist of the other primarch.

He turned, thinking to take back his weapon, but was frozen by the look of cold rage in Guilliman’s eyes. Jaw twitching, the primarch of the Ultramarines took the Lion’s blade in both hands and brought it down sharply across his knee.

The Lion watched the blade split along the fuller, breaking into two shards that glittered in artificial sunlight as they toppled from Guilliman’s spreading fingers. They fell into the white sand at the Lion’s feet.

‘Your sword for your oath,’ Guilliman growled, teeth gritted. ‘Such has become your honour, *knight of Caliban*.’

Guilliman stepped past the Lion and took hold of Curze. The Night Haunter allowed himself to be led away, smiling back over his shoulder at the dishonoured commander of the Dark Angels.

Slowly, the Lion crouched and reached out a hand to touch the two pieces of the broken sword. He picked them up, sadness turning to anger.

‘Weakness!’ he bellowed, thrusting the shards towards Guilliman’s back. ‘Self-righteousness never conquered the galaxy, brother. And it will not save you from Horus!’

‘Be gone,’ he heard Sanguinius say, not turning around. Immediately, the Lion regretted his words, remembering the vision that had beset his lord of late. He took a step but was stopped by the emperor’s next words. ‘Leave, brother. The Triumvirate has ended. You are not welcome in Imperium Secundus.’

The Lion thought to argue again, but there was no more to be said. He stalked from the legata collegius without a backward look.

THIRTY-ONE

Disloyalty and dishonour

Caliban

The thrum of the engines through the deck beneath his feet brought back many memories. Astelan paced the command bridge of the *Spear of Truth* and relived the campaigns he had fought since he had been appointed to command of the venerable battle-barge.

For the moment the unaugmented serfs that usually attended to running the minor ship systems had been replaced, so that the bridge crew were all Space Marines loyal to Astelan. They looked expectantly from their stations.

‘What are your orders, First Master? What do you want to do?’ Galedan stood a little to one side as his executive officer, in place of a shipmaster. It was such a shame that Melian had been so naïve. It would have been glorious for the three of them to be reunited.

‘My orders?’ Astelan grinned. ‘I have a fully functional battle-barge to command. I can do whatever I wish, old friend. If I choose to head out to the Mandeville point and leave wretched Caliban, that is what I shall do. With a battle-barge and thirty thousand Space Marines, I could conquer a whole sector.’

He moved to the navigation controls and punched a few keys. On the main screen the nearby star systems sprang out in sharp relief from the hololithic display. He turned to Galedan, amused.

‘Pick one,’ he declared.

‘Master?’

‘Pick a system, and we’ll conquer it for you. I’ll even rename it in your honour. Galedania? Galedan Prime? Alpha Galedius?’

Galedan made a show of looking at the map projection. He scratched his chin.

‘How about w–’

His answer was interrupted by a call from Bastullan at the sensor banks.

‘First Master, orbital platforms are showing a spike in energy generation. They’re powering up.’

‘Detecting weapons lock on the *Spear of Truth*, First Master,’ added Galedan, looking past Bastullan’s shoulder.

‘Do we respond, First Master?’

‘Someone doesn’t trust us,’ Astelan said, eyebrows rising. ‘Remain at readiness, no need to provoke matters further.’

‘Incoming command-channel transmission, First Master.’

‘I will receive it in the strategium,’ Astelan replied, stepping towards a side door from the bridge. ‘Sar Luther’s channel?’

‘Yes, First Master.’

He nodded and strode from the bridge, the doors hissing shut behind him. The chamber was dominated by a hololith table, dormant at the moment, and various cogitators and communications consoles. Astelan stepped up to the closest receiving station and activated the visual-feed. A screen at chest height flickered into life, a grey-and-white image of Luther appearing in the curved glass. Astelan could see that he was in his study.

‘*Give me one reason not to blow you out of orbit, you treacherous cur!*’ the Grand Master snapped.

‘You wouldn’t destroy the *Spear of Truth*,’ Astelan replied.

‘*The blood of eighteen Space Marines is on your hands, Astelan. You deliberately destroyed any chance I had of Belath turning to the cause.*’

‘I assume that we can both speak with candour, Sar Luther.’ Astelan did not wait for confirmation. ‘I did exactly that. I wanted to know if I can trust you.’

‘*Trust?*’ Luther slammed a fist onto his desk. ‘*Trust is alien to you, Astelan. I was a fool for placing my trust in you.*’

‘They were Dark Angels.’

‘*What do you mean?*’

‘The Space Marines that died. They were Dark Angels. Enemies. You said so. I wanted to know if you were true to that belief. More will come, and you must be prepared to resist them.’

‘*You pre-empted my orders!*’

‘Yet again, I did what I had to. Our pact is sealed, blood on our hands. My fate and yours, entwined, Grand Master. And Belath dead, I take it.’

‘*He is. Zahariel slew him when he was about to attack me.*’

‘Zahariel…? Interesting. And our casualties?’

‘*A few. Only Zahariel and a handful of his acolytes survived the fighting. Lord Cypher is missing. He was seen to leave the hall, but there was anarchy. He might have been caught by one of the foe.*’

‘Or he sought a different ally,’ Astelan said darkly. ‘His purpose and ours have never been wholly aligned.’

‘*It is no concern of yours. I strip you of your rank, banish you from the Order. I am sending a company of knights to take you into custody.*’

‘You will call them back.’ Astelan leaned closer to the console, knowing that his face would loom large in the display at Luther’s end. ‘If I am not satisfied at

the conclusion of this conversation, I will order the *Spear of Truth* to battle readiness. If you do not open fire first, I will.'

'*To what end?*'

'I will not serve a coward.'

'*What right have you to judge me?*'

'I judge you too well, *Sar* Luther.' Astelan straightened, becoming less threatening. 'You believe in honour. I do not. Not by your measure. You need me to do the dishonourable acts that you cannot bring yourself to even acknowledge must be done. Your strength comes from your righteousness, and I would have it no other way. But I served the Emperor Himself, and I learned first-hand that honour is the foe of necessity. Do you think Griffayn or Zahariel will be your blade in the dark? If one of them decides to chart a different course to yours, will it be your hand that strikes them down?'

Luther said nothing, but stalked back and forth behind his desk, moving in and out of view. Astelan waited for an answer, knowing that Luther had no choice.

'*No one need think that the world can be ruled without blood. The civil sword shall and must be red and bloody.*' Luther scratched at his beard, not looking directly at the visual feed, talking almost to himself. '*Yet, the office of Grand Master must be unimpeachable, beyond reproach.*'

'Your hands will stay clean, my lord. I know what is in my best interest, and it is also in yours. You need not even sully your thoughts considering such deeds. I will be ready and willing, eyes and ears open, and no threat to your position will come to pass.'

'*The man who has the will to undergo all labour may win to any good.*' Luther stopped and stared at the link. '*You are right, your ways and means are not mine, but they have a value in this dark galaxy. But also know that I am still the source of your power and there are those that will be commanded to avenge me should I fall by your miscreancy.*'

Astelan nodded his agreement. Silence continued for several seconds.

'The defence of Caliban is not enough,' he said. 'You must expand your base of power.'

'*I know*.'

'You again command the power to overthrow star systems. I was just discussing with Galedan the object of our next attention.'

'*I have already decided where the blade will fall, First Master.*'

THIRTY-TWO

Bound for Caliban

Ultramar

The Dark Angels' withdrawal from Macragge Civitas was as swift as their arrival. The skies above the city were criss-crossed by flights of shuttles and gunships dropping from orbit and returning in a constant relay. Just five hours after the spectacle at the legatus collegius, Holguin and his warriors assigned to the castrum were to be the last to depart.

He drew up the Deathwing veterans in straight ranks, determined to leave with dignity and honour. For all that blame for the events in Illyrium had been laid upon the Lion, Holguin held Redloss and the Dreadwing as the guilty parties. He had spent many hours examining the vox-logs recorded during the campaign and there was ample reason to suspect Farith had looked for ways to excite resistance and inflate the conflict for his own ends.

A tread close by caused Holguin to turn sharply, hand moving to the hilt of his longsword. He relaxed when he saw that it was Drakus Gorod. A step behind the Invictus commander was Azkaellon, his injured arm encased in a mess of pipes and metal splints that Holguin knew signalled a recent bionic attachment.

'I wish that our acquaintance had been under better circumstances,' said Holguin. He extended a hand of brotherhood, not sure if the other would accept it, but feeling the gesture had to be made.

'I would have you at my shoulder in any battle,' said Gorod, grasping the proffered hand. 'Do not suffer under the condemnation levelled at others.'

'I do not.' Holguin released his grip and looked at Gorod and Azkaellon. 'You may judge my liege how you wish, but know that he has always been loyal. If he overstepped his bounds, it is not out of treachery but misguided determination. You will need steel in your hearts to do what must be done next. I do not know what lies ahead for me and my brothers, but you carry the hope and future of mankind with you.'

'If you see Horus,' Azkaellon said, 'be sure to kill him for me.'

'I will,' said Holguin.

He turned on his heel and snapped out the command that set his warriors marching down the corridor. He followed behind in step, ignoring the dark glances and dirty looks directed at his company by the menials and servants they

passed. Ever since their arrival they had been welcome only in word, not deed. Now it seemed the populace of the castrum were brave enough to show their displeasure, as though sneering from behind the cloaks of Guilliman and Sanguinius.

A Stormbird waited for them. Without ceremony, the last representatives of the Dark Angels left Macragge Civitas.

The journey to the *Invincible Reason* took less than an hour. The fleet was already breaking orbit around the flagship, dozens of cruisers, battle-barges and support vessels moving towards the Mandeville point for the jump into warp space.

Arriving aboard the primarch's vessel Holguin was met by a serf with a message that he was to attend the Lion in his private chamber. Dismissing the Deathwing, formally renouncing his temporary command of the brotherhood, Holguin quickly made his way to his primarch's quarters.

The Lion sat upon his throne, his black armour showing the signs of recent battle, the black and gold much scuffed and chipped. The primarch held the two pieces of the broken Lion Sword in his lap, his gaze distant. Holguin came to attention before his liege and banged a fist to his chest in salute.

'It is done?' asked the Lion.

'Yes, my liege.'

Silence followed. Holguin wondered if he was dismissed, but would not speak until invited. Eventually the Lion held out the pieces of the broken blade.

'Take care of these,' he said.

Holguin took them and returned to his place. It seemed the Lion would be no more forthcoming, and Holguin risked a question.

'What happens now, my liege?'

'You will receive orders soon enough, little brother,' said the Lion, and with those words Holguin knew he was no longer required. He saluted again and left the Lion to his thoughts.

When Holguin had gone, the lord of the First Legion sat as he so often sat, leaning back in his ornate throne of ivory and obsidian. His elbows rested upon the throne's sculpted arms, while his fingers were steepled before his face, just barely touching his lips. Unblinking eyes, the brutal green of Caliban's forests, stared dead ahead.

He remembered words spoken in this chamber a year ago, when Tuchulcha had been delivered up to him and it seemed the Thramas crusade and Curze would both come to an end. Not so long ago, but a lifetime of experience. He had thought Guilliman on the verge of treachery, attempting to set himself up as a rival to the Emperor. The Lion had chosen then that it would be better for the Imperium to perish than another to reign in the stead of his father.

War unending, that had been his silent vow.

So righteous. To believe that he and his Legion could have been the crux of the conflict engulfing the whole galaxy. Times changed so swiftly.

‘There will be no new emperor,’ he had vowed.

How vain those words seemed now. He had thought to destroy Imperium Secundus, but would never have thought that his participation would be the means. It gnawed at him to think that perhaps he had handed victory to Horus. Had he not been blinded by his desire to capture Curze, would he have been able to save Sanguinius from the fate he had foreseen?

‘Does any of it matter?’ he asked.

A diminutive figure stepped out of the darkness of the throne chamber. A child’s height, it wore an ebon robe, its hands concealed with gloves as black as the shadows. A hood concealed its face but underneath the mantle two eyes burned like embers.

‘Still time?’ The Lion frowned. ‘Time for what? Imperium Secundus cannot be saved, I have broken the Triumvirate, as surely as Guilliman broke my sword. It may not have been perfect, but there was a balance between three of us. The two of them will tug upon the rein of power, negating the other. I cannot defeat Horus alone, and they cannot defeat him without me.’

The Watcher in the Dark said nothing, but the Lion heard its meaning as clearly as any spoken word.

‘Caliban? I thought it lost. Perhaps you are right. If Terra has fallen and Macragge will fail, Caliban might stand, even if only as a light in the darkness for a while. There is strength there. It might even become a beacon, a refuge, as Macragge was during the Great Crusade, as Terra was during Old Night. Humanity has survived worse disaster than the Warmaster’s rebellion. Neither Horus nor Guilliman will command me. I will honour Caliban, as perhaps I have not in the past. There is still time to save my Legion, my home.’

Resolved to a new course of action, the Lion activated the vox-link. When he glanced down again, the Watcher had disappeared.

THIRTY-THREE

A new beginning

Caliban

Luther mounted the steps to the platform erected at the end of the staging grounds. Fifteen thousand warriors were assembled on the open space and beyond the gate, screens erected at regular intervals projecting from visual feeds and vox-casters placed all around. High-powered transmitters were ready to broadcast his words to the knights already in orbit.

Astelan and Griffayn were on the stage, standing shoulder to shoulder in a show of unity between Terran and Calibanite. Zahariel waited at the bottom of the steps, out of sight for the moment.

A thunderous roar greeted the Grand Master as he strode across the heavily braced boards of the stage. He raised a hand, modestly accepting the adulation of the thousands of Space Marines. Stopping at centre stage he lifted his other hand, signalling for quiet.

‘My thanks for your support,’ he began. ‘Today is an auspicious day, though many of you would not know it. In the days before the coming of the Imperium, this day would be spent in celebration of Sar Duriel, one of my predecessors. Sar Duriel lived three hundred years before I was born, but he was always an inspiration to me. It was him that single-handedly slew the great Wyrm of Caprosia. This feat in itself would be worthy of acclaim, but it was what Sar Duriel did later that captured my imagination. With the skin of the Wyrm he had his best craftsmen fashion armour, five suits in all, enough to clad a warrior head to foot yet move with ease.

‘He did not take this armour for himself. Nor did he give it to his lieutenants or champions. No, Sar Duriel had a better idea than that. He sent a herald and suit of armour to each of his five closest rivals. The armour was a gift, and the message that went with them was simple. “Our enemies are the beasts of the forest,” the heralds declared, “not each other.” Sar Duriel did not see his fellow lords as foes, but as allies.’

Luther gestured to Griffayn and Astelan, smiling.

‘We cannot pretend that we have not had our differences. Blood has been shed, which often demands blood be shed in return, but there will be no reprisals or retaliation. The Order was once many orders, but a singular purpose prevailed,

the same purpose that inspired Sar Duriel, and even the Lion. That simple truth. We are not enemies. Terran. Calibanite. Exile or returning hero. We all fight the same foe and are united under that banner. We are all knights of the Order!'

A tremendous shout greeted this declaration. Luther allowed the warriors to voice their appreciation for a few more seconds before the Grand Master's hand moved skywards, arcing from left to right to encompass the heavens.

'Up there, beyond Caliban, beyond this star system, a war rages. A war that will decide the fate of thousands of billions of lives.' His hand dropped into a fist at his chest. 'But not here! Here, Caliban will decide its fate. The Order and Caliban are one and the same, as has been the case for a thousand years. Though we honour the past, we must look to the future, to our security and prosperity.

'You – my knights, the Order, the defenders of Caliban – are the key to that future. In your hands we entrust our liberty, our very survival. As once a generation of Caliban set forth to conquer the galaxy for the Emperor, now a new generation stands upon the brink of a far more justified crusade.'

Zahariel could feel the flood of feeling emanating from the crowd. It needed no manipulation from him or his acolytes. A pure upwelling of dedication and loyalty for Luther, swelled by the man's presence and words. Not for nothing had the Grand Master laboured so hard upon the training of his new knights, nor the precise wording of their lessons and oaths. Right now the majority of the recruits were picturing themselves as the knights of old, servants of the Order ready to ride forth to battle the Great Beasts – a mould into which they had been continually pressed for the last decade or more.

Luther's speech continued, delivered perfectly as he stalked to the front of the stage, a hand held out, trembling with suppressed emotion.

'We were an army waiting for a battle. Stranded, ignored, exiled in our own home. We were impotent, blindly and dumbly being led to the slaughter like stunned grox. But no longer! The universe has seen fit to deliver to us a means of salvation. Warships! Transports! The fleet in orbit is only the beginning. These vessels do not make us strong. But they give us a chance! They are a key to the prison that has kept us in bondage. Once released, we shall forever be free, no matter what fate awaits us.

'It is no longer our lot to serve distant masters and uncaring lords. The blood we spill, the sweat we shed, is for us. Each endeavour we embark upon is for Caliban. The Emperor is not our master, and we will not be slaved to Horus.

'It is a message we can take to others. We will be heralds of hope to those that will listen. Other worlds, other peoples will feel the same for us and we will extend the hand of friendship. In alliance we will be stronger still.

'As for those worlds too selfish or foolish to listen… The hand of friendship can easily become the fist that holds a blade. Our reach is long and will become

longer still. Not in tyranny and conquest, but in liberation.’

Another roar of approval swelled from the audience. Zahariel could imagine the decks of the ships above ringing with the same shouts of praise. Luther allowed it to continue for a while, retreating with head bowed to the centre of the stage. This time he waited for them all to quieten of their own accord.

‘One day, they will come for us,’ he said, his whispered words carried by the vox-casters. ‘Horus’ Legions, or the Emperor’s. Perhaps even the Lion himself will return to claim the throne he abandoned.’

Luther paused, allowing his words to sink in. He clasped his hands together, palm to palm, fingers lifted to his lips.

‘Let them come. Let them bring all their ire and indignant rage.’ His voice grew in strength. ‘Let them unleash their wrath and spew forth their base lust. We will never surrender. We will never relent.’

Another pause and another outpouring of support. Luther played his warriors’ thoughts like a carefully tuned instrument, with the deft strokes of a maestro. Now was fast approaching the moment of truth. The moment Caliban craved. The possibilities made Zahariel’s thoughts burn, his nerves afire with excitement.

‘The Order has been restored and Caliban’s honour with it. But the Order is nothing if not the sum of its traditions, and there has been a void of late. It is time to fill that void, to bring guidance to aggression, wisdom to strength, a word before the deed. Raise voice in thanks as I present the new Lord Cypher!’

Zahariel pulled down the iron mask beneath his hood. With his smile hidden, he started up the steps to thunderous applause.

THIRTY-FOUR

Epiphany

Ultramar

In the course of rising to the position of Grand Master of the Order, the Lion had learned the lesson to ‘command without doubt’. Luther had impressed upon him the need to show strength, unwavering commitment and singularity of purpose at all turns. Even against the greatest of reverses it was imperative that a leader never once revealed the cracks beneath the surface.

Had he learned that lesson too well? Had firm leadership become uncompromising tyranny? Exiling Luther and the others had been an act of leadership, a response to events that sent a message to Luther, but it had been misheard. Had he intended punishment? Perhaps, but the words of trust, of placing the future of the Legion in the hands of Luther, had been meant as spoken.

If only I had returned, he thought. *I should have gone back with them after Zaramund.*

Even if he could bring himself to confide these thoughts to another, there were none to hear them. He waited for his subordinates in the chamber of Tuchulcha. The warp-device’s meat puppet stood close at hand, hands limp by his sides, face slack. The Watcher avoided this place, and he wondered if that was a warning in itself.

Still, Tuchulcha had another chance to prove itself useful. The power of travel in a galaxy beset by warp storms might yet be decisive in the battles to come.

Stenius arrived first, bringing with him Lady Fiana. The Navigator kept her gaze on the ground, refusing to look at Tuchulcha. Her body was emaciated, as wasted as the servitor’s, her skin lightly whorled with scars she had received from a nephilla’s warp bolt. Her third eye was covered by a plain silver band, her grey hair cut short.

They said nothing above customary greetings and waited in silence until Redloss and Holguin arrived. The Dreadwing’s voted lieutenant bore his axe as usual. The brother-commander of the Deathwing had his longsword upon a hanger at his back, and another great blade at his waist. The primarch recognised it immediately – the Lion Sword.

‘I thought I said to get rid of that,’ said the Lion, pointing at the blade.

‘Forgive me, my liege, but your instruction was to “take care of these”, and I thought it better to be literal in this instance.’ Holguin looked slightly lost as he gazed at the Lion, uncertainty etched into his expression. ‘I thought I might get the blade reforged, if possible.’

The Lion quelled a contemptuous laugh, returning to his earlier thoughts. The Legion was in a fragile state, beset by gloom and setbacks. They would look to him to lead them, to provide guidance and purpose. He bit back his cynicism and said nothing.

The last officer summoned was Myrdun of the Librarius. Although he had not been party to earlier strategies, the psyker had proven himself dedicated while performing his duties in the castrum. His insight would be useful in the trials to come.

The Lion looked at them, his closest counsellors. Each had proven their worth and loyalty many times, yet the Lion could not help but feel that his court was incomplete.

‘We return to Caliban,’ he announced.

They looked at him in surprise, even Lady Fiana. Holguin smiled, Redloss frowned; only Stenius’ artificial face betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

‘I would not say this expedition to the east had been a waste of time,’ the Lion continued. ‘We have faced battles and tribulations, but we have also seen the true measure of the enemy we face and learned what must be done to prevail.

‘We will not depart Macragge in shame. If you bring me a man that says we have made no difference here, I will call him a liar. I do not know if the Lords Guilliman and Sanguinius can build a new Imperium, but if it is at all possible they are the ones that will succeed. But it is not my place, our place, to be fettered by the designs of others. Too long have I pursued the agenda laid down by both enemy and ally. Curze thought to hold us from saving Terra, and though he is now undone, he succeeded in his aim. Guilliman thought to make me a hunting dog, but it was wrong to serve any other master save the true Emperor, and He has been taken from us.

‘The campaign against Horus must continue, but the judgement of victory must change to account for our misfortunes of war. If our exploits in the Five Hundred Worlds have taught me anything, it is that no expedition is secure, no war won without a solid foundation.

‘For that reason we shall return to Caliban. Tuchulcha will bring us through the ruinstorm again and we will seek out Corswain and the rest of the Legion, for I believe that they fight on. With them we shall reunite with my liege-brother and fortify Caliban against all aggression. Our assembly here will be all the stronger for the presence of Corswain and Luther.

‘For a long time now it seems that we have been a broken Legion, sundered between Terrans and Calibanites, split by brotherhoods, divided by the necessities and geography of war. Lord Guilliman may have his faults, but he once passed to me a fundamental truth that has formed the basis of all he has achieved. He told me “no house divided against itself can stand”. Our Legion must be one and whole again.’

The Lion turned to Tuchulcha’s meat puppet. The servitor straightened, face animating with a semblance of life.

‘How may I be of assistance, Lion?’ the wasted vessel asked.

‘Can you take us to Caliban?’

‘Home?’ the creature’s lips twisted in a grotesque smile.

‘Yes, my home.’

‘As you will, it shall be done. Do you wish me to move the fleet now?’

The Lion shook his head. ‘No, we will proceed to the Mandeville point as though for a normal warp jump. It is even more important now that Guilliman does not learn of your existence. With the device at Sotha crippled I do not think he would show restraint in obtaining you for himself.’

‘You are wise and courageous, Lion.’

Returning his attention to his subordinates, the Lion noticed that Holguin’s demeanour had changed drastically.

‘Why so glum, little brother?’ asked the Lion. ‘Have you changed your mind about the prospect of seeing Caliban again?’

‘No, my liege. It simply occurs to me that whatever happens next, Curze has the last laugh. Even if the Emperor had been able to hold for a time, Terra has surely fallen now. Though I do not doubt that the Lords Sanguinius and Guilliman will finally have his head for his treasonous acts, bringing the lie to all his claims, his actions may well have gained Horus that victory. He’ll be dead, but their traitors’ cause is won.’

The Lion was about to voice some words of reassurance, unthinking, but the platitude died before it reached his lips. The primarch’s heart started to race as though in the full flow of battle, his skin prickling with thick sweat as a thought tried to free itself from the depths of his mind like a large beast struggling to escape quicksand.

The more he tried to focus on the thought, the more it eluded him.

‘What did you say, little brother?’

‘Curze will have won, even though he is going to be executed, my liege. If there was…’

Holguin’s words faded as memories swamped the Lion.

‘You can’t kill me! You don’t kill me!’

He saw Curze's gloating face, his assertions time and again. Madness, or actual foresight?

'*Justice has hunted me since the day I opened my eyes on night-shrouded Nostramo. But none of you have the guts to level it. You force me to wait until that assassin's blade strikes. You are all cowards, speaking of conviction but showing none. Not born yet is the wielder of the blade that will bring me peace.*'

Curze's claims…

'*Before all is done, it is not only my back that will be broken. I will not beg for my life, but* you *will. Of all your brothers, for me you will sacrifice your honour.*'

But it was his other words that burned like fire through the clamour.

'*You have to accept it. You don't kill me. I am redeemed, my life taken by one of the Emperor's assassins.*'

'Tuchulcha.' The Lion turned to the servitor, grasping its arm in a massive hand. 'Sanguinius' hall is shielded against teleportation. Can you bypass those shields?'

The puppet made a pretence of thinking, eyes cocked upwards. The blank gaze returned to the Lion a few seconds later.

'Yes, Lion. The barrier of Macragge is no obstacle to me, though it may hurt you.'

'Send me to him, to Sanguinius,' the Lion snapped. He thrust a finger at the commander of the Deathwing. 'And Holguin too. Send us now!'

'As you command, Lion,' the servitor said with a bow.

In an instant, the *Invincible Reason* disappeared from around them.

THIRTY-FIVE

The hardest words

Ultramar

If there was one consolation to be taken from the entire debacle, it was that Curze would soon be dead. Guilliman glowered at his fallen brother, who stood before Sanguinius with a defiant look, hands still bound. Slowly, the Night Haunter turned his head, his gaze sliding to Guilliman. His lips slowly peeled back to reveal stiletto fangs.

‘Does it make it harder, dear Roboute?’ asked Curze.

‘Make what harder?’ Guilliman knew he should not ask, but could not stop himself.

‘Killing me. Did the veneer of the law make it palatable?’ Curze sighed and looked away, acting coy. ‘And what of the Lion? He broke the law as well. Why is he not standing next to me?’

Guilliman had no answer for that and glanced towards the regent emperor. Sanguinius regarded Curze with contempt, one fist gripped in the other.

‘I have no blade,’ said the new emperor.

‘Nor I,’ confessed Guilliman. He had surrendered his gladius as a symbolic gesture when he had passed his military power to the Lion.

Curze cackled, but Guilliman sensed there was more bravado than humour. Since Sanguinius had dissolved the trial and subsequently declared Curze a traitor, the Night Haunter’s defiance had waned.

‘I will summon Gorod with a weapon.’ Guilliman hesitated. ‘Shall I, or will you lay the final stroke?’

Sanguinius did not reply, his gaze fixed on Curze. Guilliman could not guess at what occupied his brother’s thoughts. His own had been a turmoil in the last few hours, veering between anger at the Lion and despair at his own failure to keep Imperium Secundus intact, occasionally stopping at blind hope along the way.

‘I should do it,’ declared Guilliman, though it was the last thing he wanted to say. Even though it went against all of his beliefs, bordering on cold murder, he would be no leader if he expected another to do what he could not. ‘Emperors should not be executioners.’

‘Our father would agree,’ said Curze. ‘Don’t sully your hands with the blood of your victims. Why else would he have kept such a terrible specimen as me? Why

would he give me a Legion of his finest warriors if he did not think I would be needed?'

'Be silent.' Sanguinius stood up, stretching his wings to their full extent. He flexed his hands. 'I need no blade.'

'You don't kill me, you cretins,' said Curze. He said the words again, but with diminishing conviction. 'You don't kill me. You don't kill me. I don't die here…'

It was as though Sanguinius gleamed with a pale light, his face as white as Curze's, eyes becoming blood-red, surrounded by the golden crown of flowing hair. Guilliman had witnessed glimpses of his brother's wrath before, but had never seen the true Blood Angel unleashed. Sanguinius surged forward on alabaster wings, half a metre from the floor, whiteness streaming from him like flames.

'This is not how I die!' Curze's shout was desperate, a mixture of anger and confusion.

Sanguinius landed, towering over the Night Haunter, his face impassive, showing no regret or anger.

Guilliman felt a pressure in his skull, a momentary force from within that reminded him of a warp translation. A sudden explosion of pressure flowed around him. The primarch reeled, throwing up a hand, expecting some final trickery from Curze.

There before him, wreathed in aether-frost, was the Lion with one of his officers. The primarch dropped to a knee, his face wracked with pain, one arm moving to clutch at his chest even as he reached out to Sanguinius. The other, Holguin, collapsed with a cry of agonised despair.

'No!' The Lion's shout reverberated around the hall. He stood up with obvious effort. Holguin started to stir. 'Stay your hand, brother!'

'Guards!' bellowed Guilliman, hand moving to the hilt of the gladius that was not there. 'Protect your emperor!'

Curze fell to his knees with a clatter of chains and let out a laugh of relief and triumph.

Sanguinius turned, an apparition of angelic death. His crimson eyes regarded the Lion for a second. The golden light dimmed and the regent emperor settled, his eyes becoming their usual clear blue, his skin regaining its bronzed complexion.

'Do not slay Curze!' The Lion moved to interpose himself between Sanguinius and the Night Haunter, each movement causing fresh spasms to wrack his face. 'Though saying such will cause me greater pain than the touch of his accursed blades.'

The doors burst open and a stream of legionaries poured in – Invictus Terminators, Azkaellon and his remaining Sanguinary Guard, Space Wolves and

White Scars – all with bolters and blades levelled at the Lion and Holguin. The Deathwing commander pushed to his feet, wincing.

‘Drop your weapons!’ shouted Gorod, striding to the front of the company.

The Lion turned slowly, holding out his open hands. He nodded to Holguin, who unfastened the hanger of his round-tipped longsword and let it fall to the floor. The Space Marines moved out to encircle the primarchs.

‘And the other one,’ Gorod said, jabbing his combi-bolter towards Holguin.

‘This would not be much use,’ the Deathwing commander replied, tipping out the two shards of the Lion Sword next to his signature blade.

‘Explain yourself,’ Guilliman demanded, crossing the hall to Gorod. The Invictus captain handed his master a powered blade, almost a dagger in the hand of his giant master. ‘Do not think I will let you walk away freely this time.’

‘We have made a grave mistake, brothers,’ said the Lion. He looked down at Curze. ‘He does not die here.’

Moving slowly, he stepped back until he could see both of his loyal brothers. Holguin remained where he was, eyes flicking between the primarchs and the ring of Space Marines around them. The Dark Angel kept his hands away from his body, though the truth was that if he desired to attack one of his brothers he would not need a weapon.

‘You have to listen to me,’ he said, holding up a hand in a gesture of peace. He pointed at Curze and then the pieces of the Lion Sword. ‘He saw it, the breaking of the blade. When we fought and I broke his spine, he said that his back would not be the only thing broken that day.’

‘A vague enough declaration,’ said Guilliman.

But Sanguinius was listening intently. The Lion directed his argument to the primarch of the IX, knowing that if he could convince the emperor then Guilliman’s honour would force him to follow.

‘No, it was a prediction. As was this moment when I would beg for his life.’ The Lion gritted his teeth and did not look at Curze, fearing that any sign of gloating, a momentary barbed look or word might ruin everything. ‘He saw what would happen.’

‘He has claimed to have seen many things,’ said Sanguinius. ‘What is the importance of this particular vision?’

‘None,’ said the Lion, ‘other than proof that his visions are real.’

‘A leap of faith, or circular logic,’ said Guilliman. ‘It is a prophecy that fulfils itself. Even so, what of it?’

‘Over and again, above all other things, this wretch has claimed that we cannot kill him, that we do not kill him. He even described the manner of his death. An assassin, sent by the Emperor.’ Neither of them seemed to understand the

implications of this. The Lion took a long breath and continued. ‘An assassin not yet sent, perhaps not yet *born*, if Curze’s word is to be believed.’

Still they did not see what was obvious to the Lion. His frustration shortened his temper despite his efforts and he barked his next words.

‘The Emperor cannot despatch this assassin if He is dead! If Curze is telling the truth, the Emperor is alive!’

Guilliman shook his head in disbelief, but after a moment Sanguinius’ expression was one of dismay.

‘If the Emperor lives…’ The Blood Angel’s words were barely a whisper. ‘Then Terra has not fallen?’

‘Supposition,’ Guilliman said, swiping away the Lion’s argument with a sweep of his hand. ‘A fractured hypothesis based on the rantings of a madman.’

‘And what of my vision, brother?’ Sanguinius asked quietly. ‘Am I mad also?’

To this Guilliman had no reply, his hands flailed the air even as he searched for an answer. The Lion had not considered this and the elation he had felt was tainted by a sad realisation.

‘If Curze’s premonition is true, brother,’ he said, looking at Sanguinius, ‘then so is yours.’

The Blood Angel nodded solemnly, his expression resigned.

‘To die at Horus’ hand is a fate I gladly accept,’ Sanguinius declared, ‘if it means that the Emperor yet lives and fights for mankind. I would speed to this confrontation on the swiftest of wings if it means the enduring reign of the Emperor.’

‘What of this creature?’ Guilliman asked, gesturing with his blade towards Curze. ‘If you say we cannot kill him, will you be his gaoler? I would not suffer his presence a moment longer than necessary.’

The Lion looked at Curze and the Night Haunter stared back, showing no sign of emotion. As surely as Curze was chained, the Lion would be bound to the fate of the traitorous dog who had thrice nearly killed him.

His future would also be here, for the moment, on Macragge, with his brother primarchs. If Terra still held they would have to devise a plan to breach the ruinstorm, to break through the worlds fallen to Horus and the Legions and armies that followed him. But there was hope, even if not for Sanguinius. As much as Curze was destined to survive, then the Blood Angel was destined to meet Horus, which meant that there was a chance the Warmaster would be defeated.

It also meant no return to Caliban. Whatever passed there would have to go untended, there could be no distraction. Despite all that the Watcher had warned him might transpire at home, there was a far greater role for him to play.

‘I plead your indulgence, brothers.’ The Lion fell to one knee. ‘I have acted in a shameful manner and I deserve and ask for no forgiveness. I humbly request a chance to right such wrongs as I have committed. I will be Curze’s keeper, if you spare his life.’

Guilliman’s face was ashen, his arguments dissipated. He stared at the Lion for several seconds and wiped a hand across his face. He turned away, his gaze roaming until it alighted on Sanguinius. The Blood Angel’s expression was dark at he met his brother’s stare.

‘But if the Emperor still lives…’ Guilliman’s voice was barely a haunted whisper as he considered all that he had done.

There was silence for a moment, and then the hall rang with Curze’s shrill laughter.

EPILOGUE

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The rift spat forth a stream of whirling energy as a ship broke through from the warp, its massive hull silhouetted against an impossible maelstrom of colours. The rift sealed as the battle-barge cut its warp engines and plasma drives burst into life, leaving a stream of cobalt fire.

An experienced onlooker would have known that something was amiss. Not all of the huge plasma nacelles were operating: some remained dark. Debris trailed behind the immense warship, carried along by its mass for a while like the tail of a comet but slowly spinning away.

There were great welts in the hull of the ship. Ragged gouges metres-deep scarred its gun decks and weapons batteries. Craters marked the heavy armoured plates. The mouths of flight bays were dark, landing decks within empty.

Engines stuttering, wounded but not dead, the *Terminus Est* limped towards its destination.

Over the following day another five vessels manned by Calas Typhon's Grave Wardens broke warp and followed their flagship. All bore similar wounds of battle to a greater or lesser extent.

It was not just the fleet of the Grave Wardens that bore the marks of war. Scans detected ship hulls drifting lifelessly towards the inner worlds of the system, while radiation sweeps indicated recent combat.

A battle had been fought here, very recently indeed.

In the massive strategium of the *Terminus Est* the mood was pensive. It was impossible that long-range auspex had not detected the approach of the battered Death Guard flotilla. Those scanners that remained operational reported a few contacts with system monitor vessels. None of them would have been a match for even the smallest ship of the Legion flotilla. They retreated before Typhon's advance – close enough to watch, far enough to avoid attack.

Typhon, Vioss and the other officers remained at their posts, though even their superhuman resources were almost depleted. Typhon had not known such exertion, such exhaustion as he had experienced over the last year of duelling with Corswain of the Dark Angels. The Lion's son was a merciless foe when riled.

Only the comfort that he did the Plaguefather's work sustained the desolate captain. His faith, his belief that reward would be at hand, gave him strength to continue. A strength he had never received from his primarch.

'Large warship, three hundred thousand kilometres ahead,' Vioss announced from the scanning arrays. The right-hand side of the captain's face was a mask of burned flesh and blood from a plasma discharge. There was a milky cast to his eye as he looked at his commander.

Such was his fatigue Typhon thought at first that he had imagined the moment.

'A battle-barge,' Vioss confirmed. 'First Legion. On a closing course.'

'Damn Corswain,' Typhon snarled. 'Well earned is his title of the Hound of Caliban. He dogs us without fail. If there is one warship here, there will be more.'

'The recent battle… Perhaps our signals for aid have been answered by the Legion.'

Shaking his head, Typhon was about to order that the flotilla come about when a call from Hurklan at the comm-unit interrupted him.

'We are being hailed,' the sergeant declared without ceremony. Titles and formal addresses had been one of the first casualties of the ongoing battles. 'An open Legion channel. Visual-stream, no encryption.'

'A demand for surrender?' said Vioss, his mutilated mouth slurring the words.

'I think we are well past that,' replied Typhon. Intrigued, he signalled to Hurklan to accept the broadcast.

The main display flicked from the strategic overview to a large face. His thick, dark hair was cropped almost to the scalp, cheeks and chin covered by a carefully shaped beard. There was a darkness under the eyes and a few more creases than Typhon remembered, but he recognised the face immediately.

'*Welcome back to Zaramund, old friend,*' said Luther.

AFTERWORD

‘The Tale of Astelan – Part One’

I wrote those words about fifteen years ago, opening the story that would become my first Dark Angels novel *Angels of Darkness*. I had no idea back then what twists and turns the story would take over the next decade and a half – a story that *Angels of Caliban* continues to reveal, yet is still not complete.

Nor will it ever be, for what are the Dark Angels if no mysteries remain?

The testimony of Astelan in *Angels of Darkness* was the first opportunity for a Black Library novel to look at events of the Horus Heresy. The timing was spot on, allowing me to draw on the new background being developed by Alan Merrett for the Sabertooth Games collectible card game that would relaunch the Horus Heresy into full view – background that still serves to inspire the stories being explored by Black Library authors, and now Games Workshop writers as well.

At the heart of Astelan’s disaffection with the Dark Angels, the crucial conflict raised during a conversation with Alan whilst discussing my ideas for the *Angels of Darkness* tale, was that of ‘Old Legion versus New Legion’. Of all the Space Marines involved in the Horus Heresy, no Legion embodies more the inherently difficult transition from a pre-primarch to a post-primarch existence. This continues to be the central pillar of the wider story even now.

Much of the most recent development of the Dark Angels has come from another Alan – Mr Bligh of Forge World. His work has delved back further than any before, to the very founding of the Legion as the first of a new kind of elite warriors created by the Emperor. For my purposes, many of these revelations are embodied within Astelan, the incarnation of the First as they were at the time of the Emperor’s Unification of Terra. It’s been fascinating to see this character continue to take me in unexpected directions thanks to these ongoing explorations of the background, and yet still holding to the same ideals and personality that were laid down fifteen years past.

Whether on Caliban itself or in Imperium Secundus on the far side of the ruinstorm, the fate of the Dark Angels continues to be defined by the many-layered past of the Legion. I have tried to avoid any simple definitions of loyalty and treachery where the First are concerned, and especially the Lion. They have been, and continue to be, a Legion that defines their own rules. This is no less

true for the likes of Luther, Zahariel and Astelan – individuals each driven by their own agenda but considering themselves true servants of a higher ideal.

The same can be said for the concept of honour. The different architects of the Dark Angels' future all consider themselves honourable warriors, whether holding to a traditional view as in the case of Luther, or being prepared to sacrifice it for a greater cause as we see in the Lion.

These are themes that started with the excellent short story 'Savage Weapons' by Aaron Dembski-Bowden, in which we see the Dark Angels against a foe utterly without honour – Konrad Curze and the Night Lords. The Thramas Crusade really kicked off in that story and became the foundation for my novella *The Lion* and Aaron's next instalment *Prince of Crows*. Though the war for the galaxy has moved on considerably since those days, the groundwork for the events in *Angels of Caliban* was laid then. The Horus Heresy is, among many things, all about the long story, the continuing twists and turns that lead to the unexpected payoff. The 'Lion versus Curze' thread has become one of those fascinating narratives, and even though it has reached a new milestone at the end of this book, it still has a few surprises to deliver.

A mission that Aaron and I were keen to pursue was to make the Dark Angels' tale relevant to the wider Heresy. Their story is not just one that affects a single Legion, but has repercussions for all of mankind and the Imperium. In part this is addressed through the Lion's crucial involvement with Imperium Secundus, and elsewhere ('off-screen' in this story) by the continuing battles of Paladin Corswain. Though by no means easy, making these storylines a part of the bigger picture is relatively straightforward. Tying events on Caliban – the internecine politics of a group of warriors physically isolated from the rest of the fighting – into the grander conflict proved to be a sterner quest.

The solution presented itself by going full circle and returning to the core background now collected in the *Visions of Heresy* tome. With the help of series editor and M31-savant extraordinaire Laurie Goulding, I teased out the opportunities presented by the episode at Zaramund and – hopefully – in the epilogue delivered a conclusion that brings the Caliban insurrection front and centre to the battles still to rage for control of the Imperium.

Which brings us to the future.

We leave *Angels of Caliban* poised on the next great leap of the story. Imperium Secundus seems to be over and done, the ideals of its leaders and the foundations of its existence shaken to the core. The rebellion of Luther has borne glorious fruit for the Order and Caliban, but in the heart of his movement the malignancy of Chaos' corruption starts to swell.

Powers are in motion, the story continues, and there are still several key episodes awaiting us before the fighting is over.

Gav Thorpe
December 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost*, as well as the novellas *Corax: Soulforge*, *Ravenlord* and *The Lion*, which formed part of the *New York Times* bestselling collection *The Primarchs*. He is particularly well-known for his Dark Angels stories, including the Legacy of Caliban series. His Warhammer 40,000 repertoire further includes the Path of the Eldar series, the Horus Heresy audio dramas *Raven's Flight*, *Honour to the Dead* and *Raptor*, and a multiplicity of short stories. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Time of Legends trilogy, The Sundering, and much more besides. He lives and works in Nottingham.

An extract from *Legacy of Caliban*.

How did the Lion die?

It was a simple question, innocently asked, and Brother Annael had wondered why, in over four hundred years of service to the Dark Angels Chapter, it had not occurred to him before. It was the question that had propelled him from an assault squad in the Fifth Company to the ranks of the Second Company, the lauded Ravenwing, and that was when he had found out the truth.

Horus, arch-traitor, thrice-cursed, had murdered the primarch of the Dark Angels.

So he had been told by Brother Malcifer, Chaplain of the Ravenwing, when Annael had been inducted into the lore of the Second Company. Annael had understood immediately why such knowledge was so closely guarded; that the Dark Angels had been brought to the brink of destruction by other Space Marines had been a testing revelation.

He had known that there were always the weak-willed, even amongst the Adeptus Astartes, who put themselves and their ambition above the call of duty and their oaths of dedication to the Emperor. He had fought against such heretics on eight different occasions, bringing the justice of death to them with chainsword and bolt pistol, but had never suspected the full horror of the temptations that draw good warriors away from the service of the Emperor.

Weeping, Annael had listened as Malcifer had related the tale of the Horus Heresy, a cataclysmic civil war that had threatened to destroy the Imperium at its birth. The Dark Angels, the First Legion, greatest of the Emperor’s warriors, had fought against the evil of Horus and those primarchs who had been corrupted by his silken-tongued promises, and they had triumphed. The victory had been won at great cost, and Lion El’Jonson, the primarch of the Dark Angels had given his life to defeat the enemy.

Now that he was a member of the Ravenwing, it was Annael’s duty to hold to that knowledge and keep it as a sacred fire in his heart to lend strength to his sword arm and to fuel his courage in battle. Armed with such understanding, it was the Ravenwing that sought out those traitors who had turned on the Emperor, so that they might be brought to account for their sins. As a Space Marine of the Dark Angels, Annael had never lacked conviction, honour or valour, but as a chosen warrior of the Ravenwing he now understood the importance of discretion and brotherhood even more sharply.

As the attack sirens sounded again across the strike cruiser *Implacable Justice*, Annael considered the sacrifice of the Lion and knew that he was willing to make the same sacrifice to protect the Chapter and the Emperor’s dominion. His existence was not for a normal life, but to be an instrument of the Dark Angels’ vengeance against those who had so wronged them.

While he pondered his change of perspective, Annael continued with his pre-battle preparations. He had already donned his armour, allowing the adepts of the Techmarines to perform their consecrations to the Machine-God before attending to his mount.

That machine, called *Black Shadow*, was as much a symbol of his position in the Ravenwing as the emblem on his knee and the markings on his shoulder pad. In the Scout Company he had been taught to honour his weapons and his armour, and they had served him well for four centuries of battle. Now that same honour extended to his steed, and Annael was attentive in his application of the unguents to the engine and suspension, and conscientious as he spoke the dedications to the spirit of the motorbike.

It was a fine mount, and it had a history no less acclaimed than his own. In the yellow light of the boarding bay's lamps the black enamelled fairing gleamed with polish that he had applied himself only an hour before. A serf of the armoury was checking the belt feeds of the twin bolters housed in the front cowling above the handlebars, muttering invocations that would ward away jams and misfires.

'Are you excited, brother?' Still with a hint of his Lauderian accent, Zarall's deep voice was unmistakable. Annael looked around and saw his squadron-brother standing at the back of *Black Shadow*, his helm in one hand so that his features could be seen. Zarall had a broad chin and rounded cheeks, a flat nose and bright, blue eyes, and his head was topped with white hair cropped almost to the scalp. His black armour was festooned with purity and devotional seals – strips of parchment on which were written the sacred oaths and texts of the Chapter, fastened with red wax. There were twenty-eight in all, each awarded by the Grand Master of Chaplains, Sapphon, for heroic deeds and clarity of faith; Annael had six and was one hundred and fifty years Zarall's senior.

'I am always excited by the prospect of purposeful endeavour,' replied Annael, standing up. Zarall raised his eyebrows doubtfully and Annael relented in his attempt at nonchalance. 'All right, I feel as I did the first time I dropped as a full battle-brother. It is as if the last four hundred years had never happened.'

'You have a fine steed and attend well to its requirements, there is no need for apprehension,' said Zarall.

'I did not say that I was apprehensive,' replied Annael. He patted the saddle of *Black Shadow*. 'I said I was excited. I am accustomed to the drills and procedures of the squadron. I have no doubt that I will acquit myself with honour and courage.'

'Yes, but you are to be blessed on your first drop with us,' said Zarall. 'Grand Master Sammael himself will lead the attack. Be sure that his eye will fall upon the deeds of his newest recruit.'

‘And his eye will see only that which pleases him,’ Annael assured the other Space Marine. ‘Did Sergeant Cassiel ask you to ensure I was aware of the importance of my inaugural performance?’

‘Not at all, brother,’ said Zarall. The Space Marine smiled, realising that his questions were intrusive. ‘I meant no disrespect. I wished to pay my regards and tell you that I am pleased to have you serve as my squadron-brother. The Emperor is equally pleased to count you amongst the First.’

Annael grasped the hand that Zarall offered, acknowledging the apology and the praise. It was unbecoming of a Dark Angel to feel prideful, but Annael gained some satisfaction from his battle-brother’s confidence.

‘We shall bring honour to the squadron and the company, together,’ Annael said. Another armoured figure appeared behind Zarall. ‘Brother Araton, have you word yet of when we embark?’

‘Sergeant Cassiel is still in briefing with the Grand Master,’ said Araton. Stepping past Zarall, Araton looked over Annael’s bike, his experienced eye taking in every detail at a glance. He was more slender of features than Zarall, his hair shoulder-length, nose regal and eyes deep blue. ‘You have yet to calibrate your sighting arrays, brother.’

‘I was about to attend to that,’ said Annael, opting to take Araton’s comment as observation rather than criticism.

He swung a leg over the saddle of *Black Shadow* and powered up the control panel set underneath the twin bolters. The screen flickered into life with a green light, showing a selection of scanning options. With a sub-vocal command Annael brought up the sighting display inside the lens of his right eye and activated the link between his armour and the machine. After a brief burst of static, the data from the bike’s array transferred into his autosenses, half of Annael’s view becoming a schematic of the mustering bay, the other members of the squad and their bikes highlighted by glowing red runes.

Annael deactivated the link and stepped off the bike, returning his attention to his companions. Brother Sabrael had joined the group, the white of a freshly painted chevron bright on his right greave amongst several other battle honours. Annael had heard at length from Sabrael how the honour had been earned against the orks of Pahysis; several times, in fact.

‘Be sure to keep up when we attack, brother,’ said Sabrael, the hint of a laugh in his voice. His aristocratic tone had become familiar to Annael during his induction into the company, a remnant of the Dark Angel’s upbringing in the privileged classes of Aginor Sigma. How the son of a coddled elite had managed to pass the harsh initiation tests of the Chapter was a mystery to Annael, but Sabrael had proven himself a capable, if impetuous, warrior over decades of

battle, his name frequently appearing in the *Honoris Registarum*. ‘And try not to fall off that fine machine.’

‘I will take especial care,’ replied Annael, wondering when the novelty of his induction would cease to provide amusement for his squadron-brethren. ‘When you dash into more trouble than you can handle, be sure that I will not be far behind to drag you out.’

Sabrael laughed and walked away to his own machine, his armour managing to replicate the slight swagger in his step.

‘Forgive Sabrael’s exuberance,’ said Zarall. ‘He is a good warrior, despite the constant vexation he causes the Chaplains.’

‘Do not be too swift to follow his example,’ said Araton. ‘We fight as a squadron. The line between enthusiasm and foolhardiness can be crossed all too easily.’

‘I can hear you over the vox-net, brothers,’ Sabrael’s response came to Annael’s ear via his helmet communicator. ‘I know well the time for action and the time for contemplation, in right proportion.’

Annael was about to reply when Sergeant Cassiel’s voice broke over the comm.

‘Embarkation in ten minutes, stand by your mounts. Final briefing in five minutes. Be glad, for Grand Master Sammael has found us a worthy target of attention. There will be honour aplenty to spare for all of us.’

Zarall and Araton departed to their machines, leaving Annael to complete his pre-battle checks. Mounting *Black Shadow* he ran a series of diagnostic tests on the bike’s systems and all seemed to be functioning within tolerable parameters. He made a vocal note in his battle log to commend the Techmarines of the armoury on their diligence in preparing the machine for its new rider.

When he was ready, Annael thumbed the ignition rune and the engine of his mount growled into life. *Black Shadow* came alive beneath him, trembling with suppressed power. Gunning the engine, he monitored the performance display in front of him and was satisfied that all was in working order. In time, he had been told by Cassiel, he would know by sound and feel whether all was well with his steed, but for the moment he relied upon the internal systems to warn him of any cause for concern.

Engaging the gearbox, Annael allowed *Black Shadow* to roll forward a short distance, thick tyres gripping the meshwork of the deck, blue-grey smoke chugging from the exhausts. He wheeled the bike around and saw that the other squadron members were lining up by the gateway to the docking hangar.

The attack siren sounded three times: five minutes until the drop would begin. Easing into his place at the back of the squadron, Annael felt his excitement

rising again. Inside his helm, he grinned, amused at himself for feeling like a neophyte at his first battle.

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First published in Great Britain in 2016.
This eBook edition published in 2016 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Cover artwork by Neil Roberts.
Internal illustrations by Tiernen Trevallion.
Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-078-9

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  - Sixteen
- Go Forth
  - Seventeen
  - Eighteen
  - Nineteen
  - Twenty
  - Twenty-One
  - Twenty-Two
  - Twenty-Three
- Pentae
  - Twenty-Four
  - Twenty-Five

Twenty-Six
Twenty-Seven
Twenty-Eight
Hex’d
Twenty-Nine
Thirty
Thirty-One
Thirty-Two
Thirty-Three
Thirty-Four
Thirty-Five
Epilogue
Afterword
About the Author
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